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LAW AND GOSPEL IN THE
THEOLOGY OF
HELMUT THIELICKE

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the
School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Religion

by
Bernard Lothair Green
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This dissertation, written by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Joyce and my two sons Brent and Quentin who sacrificed many hours with husband and daddy so that it could become a reality.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I. THE LAW-GOSPEL DEBATE

The relation of law and gospel has been one of the major concerns of Christianity since its origination. It has become especially keen in the contemporary discussions in theology. Karl Barth's essay on gospel and law which appeared in 1935, called for a complete re-evaluation of traditional Protestant thinking. More recently, as Gerhard Forde indicates, the "'contextual' ethicists have seriously questioned whether or not law can be relied upon as a guide for proper Christian action under the gospel."¹ This is a small indication of the confusion which faces the contemporary situation.

The problem then is twofold. First, how is the law related to the gospel?, and second, how can the law be responsibly preached in the Christian tradition? These problems are at the very heart of Christian theology. Until the theologian has wrestled with these problems and offered a responsible solution, the preacher cannot hope to proclaim anything like good news.

¹Gerhard O. Forde, The Law-Gospel Debate (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), p. 139.

The reason for the significance of these problems seems to me to be clear. If the law is overemphasized, the gospel is suppressed by an all-powerful legalism. On the other hand if the gospel is all that is shown, there is the threat of an uncontrolled antinomianism. Only in the dialectic between law and gospel, judgment and grace, is there promise of a mature and truly Christian faith.

In the background of my thinking lies the conviction that we have failed to carry out the import of the law and gospel in the various areas of our life. At one time we live by the law, at another by the gospel, at still other occasions we claim autonomy from the authority of both. This conviction has led me gradually to a further conviction that if we are ever to be successful in our Christian proclamation, we must see how the law and gospel apply to every sphere. What is it that lies at the center of our faith and has a claim on all of our activity?

I have suggested that this problem is not new in itself. It dates to the very beginnings of the Christian faith. To have a historical picture of the debate would require tracing the problem through Luther and the Reformation to the present. Since this is not the purpose of this study, I have taken my freedom in referring to Luther and his views as is demanded by the subject being studied.

II. METHOD OF STUDY

The dissertation focuses on the thought of one man, Helmut Thielicke. I have chosen him for a number of reasons, perhaps all of which are not entirely clear. I think of Thielicke as a theologian-preacher. I would not be disturbed if the order were reversed but I could not accept a neat separation. I do not think that Thielicke could either, since he prefers to think of himself in that combination.

The designation of theologian-preacher in Helmut Thielicke is most attractive to me because of its uniqueness. Some prefer to be thought of as only preachers or only theologians when in fact it is impossible to package disciplines so neatly. It is true that Thielicke has become known to the world largely through his preaching rather than his theology, nevertheless it has been the discipline of the one that has given strength to the other.

Another reason for having chosen Thielicke is his treatment of the law-gospel issue. His ability as a theologian has given him insight regarding the debate. He has been able to digest the bulk of the material in his field and to delineate the problem clearly. While orthodox and Lutheran in his basic orientation he still does not hesitate to cut his own path when he has reason to do

so. He is faithful in the exposition of his opponents and forthright in his reasons for disagreement.

My selection of Thielicke does not mean that I support his views entirely. Neither was the selection arbitrary. It is my feeling that the variations cannot be understood apart from the cantus firmus. I do not mean by this analogy to place a judgment on either. It is that Thielicke represents what was held to be true by the Church for centuries and is still acclaimed by many, perhaps most, today. It ultimately will be left to the reader to determine whether Thielicke is correct in his teaching of the law and gospel.

The method I have chosen is to first of all sharpen the issue in the debate regarding law and gospel. To do this I have investigated the thought of several contemporary continental theologians. After the issue has been sharpened on each problem, Thielicke's response is given. I have separated the arguments in an effort to distinguish clearly the thought and treatment of both positions. The problems being considered will be defined in their respective chapters. Finally, I have consulted the sermons of Thielicke to determine if he carries out the implications of his teaching on law and gospel in his preaching.

It is my hope that the reader will be able to read with understanding and sense clearly the problems which I have chosen to elaborate in the contemporary controversy over law and gospel.

III. ORGANIZATION OF DISSERTATION

Chapter II introduces the man Helmut Thielicke. What are the forces which have molded his character? This chapter is meant to tell the reader who Thielicke is, what he does, and the contributions he has made to the world as a man and as a scholar.

Chapters III, IV, and V contain the body of the dissertation. Here the debate is unfolded in bold relief. The first part of each chapter discusses the issue being debated and the second part gives Thielicke's response.

Chapter III relates the problem concerning the sequence of law to gospel. Here attention is given primarily to Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. Chapter IV focuses on the third use of the law. The thought of Gerhard Ebeling and Dietrich Bonhoeffer is investigated. Chapter V centers on the relation of the conscience to law and gospel. Inquiry is made into the thinking of Bultmann, Ebeling and Bonhoeffer.

These questions are by no means all that could and should be raised in this debate. However, they are among

the basic ones, and I have limited my research to these three areas.

Chapter VI is an attempt to determine if Thielicke has been successful in preaching his theology. It is divided into five sections. The first three sections try to establish his success in preaching specifically what he teaches in his technical writings in the three areas I have explored, namely, law and gospel, the third use of the law, and the relation of law and gospel to the conscience. The fourth section is an analysis of the way in which Thielicke structures a sermon in light of his particular teaching concerning law and gospel. The final section summarizes and concludes the dissertation.

Unless otherwise stated, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible of 1952 will be used in this dissertation.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCTION TO HELMUT THIELICKE AND HIS WRITINGS

Helmut Thielicke professes to be a theologian. However it is important to recognize that it is primarily as a preacher that Thielicke has made his contribution. His theological involvement has not exiled him in the land from which many well meaning scholars have never returned. In fact, he considers the work of the theologian to be contemporary reinterpretation, largely intended to serve the task of preaching. He maintains that he wrote his magnum opus, Theological Ethics, in order to do background work for preaching, to explore the areas of man's existence, the world of politics, business, sexuality, art, and catch through them and for them the implications of law and gospel, judgment and grace.¹

As we would expect, then, his sermons grapple with a wide range of topics and interests. However, he never views himself as an un-involved observer. Thielicke's prime secret of effective preaching is his inner solidarity and identification with his listeners. Each sermon illustrates how to find the point of contact with the congregation, how to appreciate contemporary ways of

¹Helmut Thielicke, The Trouble With the Church (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 78.

thinking and temperament, and how to use stirring language and fascinating images.

Therefore, to study the sermons of Thielicke is to be captivated by a craftsman who has no contemporary superior and a theologian who wrestles thoroughly with the foundational principles for his preaching. It is doubtful if there is an American preacher of equal stature and significance, who has ranged so widely in theological and ethical study, and at the same time been so eminently successful in the interpretation of this material in relevant, contemporary, understandable style. He is a preacher's preacher.

Yet he is more than a preacher. He is also a teacher, scholar, and popular lecturer. Thielicke was educated at the universities of Greifswald, Marburg, Erlangen, and Bonn. In 1940, after teaching in various schools, he was ordained in the Evangelical Church of Germany. During the war the Nazi government forbade him to speak in public because of his anti-Nazi sermons, and he therefore carried on his active resistance in other ways.

After the war, in 1945, he became Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion at the University of Tübingen. In 1951 he was made rector of that university; later he became President of the Council

of German Rectors. In 1954 he moved to the University of Hamburg, where he is First Dean of the Theological Faculty and Professor of Systematic Theology.

Professor Thielicke very often gives popular lectures on West German television stations and preaches in St. Michaelis Kirche in Hamburg. He has published more than 200 items, his principal subject being Christian ethics.

Thielicke is a man who has faced two great tasks. The first was to bring comfort and hope in the trying years of the war. He was uniquely prepared for this. During the latter part of his education he experienced what for him was a miracle. He had a seven year illness, a form of paralysis, and was finally given only a brief time to live. Then a new drug was discovered which arrested the disease and still keeps him alive.²

After four years as a professor at Heidelberg he was dismissed by the Nazis in 1940 and forbidden to speak, travel, or publish anything. In 1942 he secured permission for one lecture a week in the Stuttgart Cathedral. Then the horrors of war broke on Germany itself, and his lectures were interrupted by air raids. First a part, then all of the church was destroyed. Thielicke's home

² Helmut Thielicke, Man in God's World (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 101f.

was also bombed, and the frightened congregation met in a nearby village. A "theology in the face of death"³ was the result of these harrowing and perplexing experiences, and it is easily understood why much of Thielicke's preaching is cast in this mold.

The second great task of Thielicke was to interpret the gospel to the student population. Since moving to Hamburg he has preached to overflow crowds at St. Michaelis Kirche. The challenge of the student thinking, reflected in such works as Nihilism, has occupied Thielicke significantly.

It is interesting that while Thielicke has engaged in teaching philosophy he has never succumbed to the temptation to construct his theology on a particular philosophical system. He is thoroughly Lutheran and makes no apologies for it. He is conservative in orientation, but enlightened, and never unfairly criticizes those who disagree with him.

I. THE PREACHER AND HIS SERMON

Preaching is at the center of Thielicke's theological concern, but not the kind of preaching that most people are in the habit of hearing, or at least what Thielicke fears they are hearing. It is his judgment

³Ibid., p. 10.

that, in the hustle of ecclesiastical routine, preaching has decayed and been relegated to the margin of things.⁴ But this does not mean that it should be replaced.

In the writings of Thieliicke it soon becomes apparent that he has two basic concerns. The first is with the man who professes to be a minister of the good news, and the second is with the message which he delivers. The second problem has to do with the methodology of preparation and delivery rather than the nature of revelation.

Thieliicke begins his probing of the problem with the preacher himself. How does the preacher treat his own message? Does he live it, or only preach it?⁵ Can he be believed, or does he have a plurality of passions which govern his life and activities? The preacher himself must be a "credible witness."⁶ It is often because of a lack of consistency in practicing faith that much preaching has become boring and colorless.

One thing that every Christian must do, according to Thieliicke, is to give God a stretch of time in his day in which he is our only companion.⁷ For the preacher this

⁴Thieliicke, Trouble With the Church, p. 1.

⁵Ibid., p. 14.

⁶Ibid., p. 15.

⁷Helmut Thieliicke, The Waiting Father (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 55.

means that he himself must be good soil for the Word of God to grow in before he can help cultivate the soil of others. Prayer and devotions should be the native soil of his life as much as the air he breathes.⁸ He learns discipleship by practicing it, by being obedient. Much of the shallowness of his preaching can be traced to the weakness of his actual spiritual condition.⁹

Closely allied to personal discipline is the way in which the canon of scripture is handled. Thieliicke expresses concern over the younger generation of theologians whom he sees drowning in hermeneutical reflection.

Long before they have seen and handled the bedrock of the biblical teaching concerning creation, the fall, and the return of Christ, they are busily occupied with mineralogical analysis and with optical researches in religious microscopy.¹⁰

However, the scripture must speak to a man before he can interpret it to another. Thieliicke fears that the preacher may use the critical apparatus prematurely, thus robbing the scripture of its power and missing the existential realities.

⁸ Helmut Thieliicke, Life Can Begin Again (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 98.

⁹ Thieliicke, Trouble With the Church, p. 18.

¹⁰ Helmut Thieliicke, Theological Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), I, xvi.

Out of the springs of a man's devotion flows the message which he bears. His second task must be taken equally as seriously as the first. It is the mechanics of preparation and delivery. A man's message is no guarantee that he will deliver it adequately.

Thielicke recognizes that preaching is an intellectual task, so one cannot be lazy and be a real preacher.¹¹ He must be able to put theology into language that can be understood and digested. The sermon is not a lecture but a message.¹² Here Thielicke gives some helpful suggestions. If a technical term must be used, explain it, even if the term is familiar.¹³ Do not say too much; learn the art of omission. Express one thing completely, for when you have done this you have implicitly expressed everything else.¹⁴

Perhaps the best method of learning what Thielicke is trying to teach is to read his sermons. He never resorts to lecturing or lengthy explanations. His practice is to illuminate a difficult point with an illustration rather than a scholarly dissertation.

¹¹Thielicke, Trouble With the Church, p. 19.

¹²Ibid., p. 21.

¹³Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 54-55.

Thielicke feels that the theologians have not been of any help to the preacher and his task. Rather they are guilty of forsaking him by "not doing much more than providing each other with problems and solutions."¹⁵ The dualism between pulpit and lectern, preacher and professor, must be bridged if new life is to come to the pulpit and the church.¹⁶

Finally there is the question concerning the application of theological and ethical principles to concrete situations in life. Many scholars are quite capable of delineating a difficult position in an intellectual community using hypothetical cases, but how specific are they in preaching? Often the specific becomes generalized and the hearer misses the point or is incapable of making the application. Thielicke speaks to this point when writing about Spurgeon. The key for both of these men is concern for the individual. Thielicke comments:

Spurgeon exercises for us the function of a corrective. For us and our kind of Christian social ethics the threatening danger is that we tend merely to enucleate the Christian "ideas" concerning the world order, the structuring of society, etc., and then to recommend them for their preservative and productive power. But since it is possible to have Christian ideas without actually believing, and to be taken up with the social teachings of Christianity (!) without becoming "engaged" personally, these ideas lose their connection with the Lord of Christendom and degenerate into ideologies . . . Thus it is

¹⁵Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 29.

possible for Christianity to become merely a pervasive atmosphere, a climate of social order, while faith dwindles away and the matter of salvation is forgotten. Therefore we stand in need of the simple way in which Spurgeon dares to say that what really and ultimately counts is to save sinners. Indeed, what really counts is that "we get to heaven." Anything else is watered-down social gospel twaddle--including all the talk about the Christian West, and even Christian social ethics no matter how responsible it may be! . . . if, yes, if in our feeling of responsibility to the world we forget heaven, and do not go out after those five brothers of Dives who are reeling and lurching toward the place of torment and losing sight of Abraham's bosom.¹⁷

This concern which Thieliicke has for the individual leads him to be evangelistic in spirit and particular in application. He speaks to the man on the street in the language he understands and makes applications that can be understood.

II. A LOOK AT HIS WRITINGS

In order to acquaint the reader with the scope of Thieliicke's writings with which I am familiar, I have divided them into four convenient categories: scholarly works, practical books, sermons, and essays.

The first category includes: Theological Ethics, The Ethics of Sex, and Nihilism. The Ethics of Sex appears in German with the Ethics as one work. It is unfortunate that it has appeared in English as a separate

¹⁷ Helmut Thieliicke, Encounter With Spurgeon (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 43-44.

work. Theological Ethics is a one volume abridgment of two volumes in German. This is Thielicke's magnum opus which was in the process of development for twenty-one years.¹⁸

To gain some insight into the thinking of Thielicke, it is helpful to understand what he was trying to do in the Ethics. It is his view that the center of theological enquiry is now shifting to the problem of ethics. But ethics begins by posing basic theological questions. In essence the work has to do with the dialectic of freedom and bondage, as discussed by Paul in Romans 6. He is not interested in developing a book of morals, or what a Christian must do, but what the Christian may do.¹⁹

The positive intention of the work is to give a Christian interpretation of human and historical reality in general. He locates the doctrine of justification at the heart of theology. "The heart, however, must pump blood into all the members of the body."²⁰ Therefore, if the liberating significance of justification for all the

¹⁸Since the writing of this dissertation volume two of Theological Ethics has been published in English. The central focus is on politics.

¹⁹Thielicke, Theological Ethics, I, xii.

²⁰Ibid., I, xiii.

dimensions of life is not indicated, the Christian is in danger of succumbing to schizophrenia.²¹

As the work developed, it became clear to him that he was really laying a new foundation for preaching. For he says, "in intention . . . theology and preaching are one in substance . . . the fundamental error in modern preaching is that we hurry directly from biblical exegesis to preaching and skip right over the whole field of ethical inquiry."²² This clearly shows us how integrated a task it is for Thielicke to preach and do theology.

It will be also important to remember, as we move from his systematic work to his preaching, the method he follows. Otherwise it will be difficult to see any correlation. He says:

Methodologically we pursue a dialectical movement of thought which involves both the erection according to abstract principles of a systematic scaffolding which will embrace and interlace the indicated correlation in all directions, and the detailed discussion within this framework of specific situations in terms of "models" or cases which are representative of the problem in question. For example, the problem of conflict is represented by the opposition between truth and love, which in turn finds illustration in, for example, the particular question of truthfulness at the sickbed.²³

He is interested in concrete reality and the struggle to discover what is right, what ought to be.

²¹Ibid., I, xiv.

²²Ibid., I, xvii.

²³Ibid., I, xviiiif.

In his book Nihilism, Thieliicke lays bare the root of the moral and cultural crisis of our times. Beneath the outward symptoms of confusion and disorder today lie the emptiness, the loss of meaning, and the collapse of value on which nihilism feeds.

In Nihilism his primary contention is that:

the usurpation of the Creator's throne by the creature brings its own retribution in the sense that broad areas of life are no longer understood by this upstart and he is finally crowded out by the powers of the other areas of existence and stripped of his pretended absoluteness.²⁴

Thieliicke proves that the last 'ism' is not the last God. The last god is God. Nihilism defeats itself because even in anxiety's horrible vacuum there is the figure of One we cannot escape.

The second category contains the practical books. Here I list the following: The Trouble With the Church, The Freedom of the Christian Man, Between Heaven and Earth, Man in God's World, Encounter With Spurgeon, A Little Exercise For Young Theologians, and Voyage to the Far East. This is a dubious classification, to be sure, for in these books there are essays which are certainly scholarly. But since most of them are collected essays of a more rhetorical nature I have placed them in this category.

²⁴ Helmut Thieliicke, Nihilism (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 21.

I will review briefly the first four books which appear above. The Trouble With the Church is written primarily to the German Church and some of it applies only to that situation. However, the majority of it can be read with profit by any churchman. Thielicke is calling for renewal at every level--from the minister's personal devotional life and study habits, through institutional structures, to worship itself.

The Freedom of the Christian Man deals with the theme of Christian freedom in the modern world. The different chapters represent lectures, addresses, articles, and study papers. Therefore the style and form varies with the different chapters. The author collected these essays over a period of time, and arranged them to comprise this book.

Between Heaven and Earth grew out of Thielicke's second visit to the United States, during which he traveled across the country, speaking, lecturing, holding numerous informal discussion sessions, and entering into dialogue with ministers, college faculty, students, and newsmen. The book has a question and answer format, and deals with topics ranging from speaking in tongues to historical criticism of the Bible.

Man in God's World developed in a period of stress and deprivation. These essays were first delivered during

World War II, when one after another of Thieliicke's meeting places was bombed. The lectures were aimed at people who were not conventional churchgoers, unaccustomed to the language and premises of the church. They were people who had to be met on their own ground, and then introduced to the Christian faith. This book is evidence that Thieliicke has a unique gift for finding the "point of contact" and addressing the gospel to this point.

The third category of writings which I have listed consists of sermons. It is interesting that the only book that contains sermons from the Old Testament is How The World Began. They are sermon-lectures on man in the first chapters of the Bible, with a postscript for theological readers. It is a very interesting study and eminently contemporary.

Out of the Depths and The Silence of God, are older collections of sermons and are not among his best. Included in them are an assortment for special days.

The remaining sermon books are more topically oriented. Between God and Satan deals with the temptation of Jesus. The Waiting Father is a book of sermons on the parables of Jesus, and was his first book to appear in English. Our Heavenly Father is a collection of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. Life Can Begin Again comprises sermons on the Sermon on the Mount. Christ and the Mean-

ing of Life is a little broader in scope, but as the title suggests has Christ as the center.

The final category which I list is essays. For the purposes of this study, it is important to mention one. I refer to "The Restatement of New Testament Mythology," which appears in Kerygma and Myth, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch. Here Thielićke gives his views on myth and how they should be translated into today's understanding.

It is obvious that out of 200 titles, many have been omitted. Books are still appearing in his name and more will be forthcoming. It has been my intention that something of the man would filter through this introduction, so that when we look more deeply into his concerns, we will have an appreciation of what gives him his impetus.

CHAPTER III

THE SEQUENCE OF LAW AND GOSPEL

I. THE ISSUE REGARDING THE SEQUENCE

Traditionally the way this topic has been approached is from law to gospel. It was assumed that the gospel could not be understood unless the law was first intelligible. Not until the twentieth century was this sequence seriously contested. Karl Barth was the first to suggest that the correct order was gospel/law. By no means have all accepted this order, but Barth has remained steadfast.

The issue at stake is whether the sequence is important and if so why. Rudolf Bultmann has followed the more traditional sequence from law to gospel. What is the disagreement concerning the sequence? What gives rise to the different approaches? What are the consequences?

The background of Barth's emphasis on "gospel and law" becomes plain when it is taken into account that his primary concern is with the one Word of God. The Word of God is Jesus Christ. The Word of God became flesh.¹ Unity must be maintained.

¹Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," in his Community, State and Church (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960), p. 73.

The distinction between law and gospel can be understood as a distinction within the one Word of God. It is not possible to have law without gospel nor gospel without law. The law is not something alongside the gospel as a separate entity. It is the will of God, and as such it attests Jesus Christ, which is the content of the gospel.²

Barth characterizes the form of the gospel as law, and the content of the law as gospel.

The Gospel itself has the form and fashion of the Law. The one Word of God is both Gospel and Law . . . In its content, it is Gospel; in its form and fashion, it is Law. It is first Gospel and then Law. It is the Gospel which contains and endorses the Law as the ark of the covenant the tables of Sinai. But it is both Gospel and Law.³

This succinctly states the position Barth holds, which he presents in many ways. In Barth's view the law gives the gospel concrete shape and direction in the sphere of men.

It is interesting to follow his reasoning for the gospel appearing before the law. On the basis of Galatians 3:17, where Paul says the giving of the law came 430 years after the promise; Barth argues that the law "must follow the promise, but it must follow the

²Ibid., p. 77.

³Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (Edinburgh: Clark, 1957), II, 2:511.

promise."⁴ To know anything about the law one must first know about the gospel.

Here the major disagreement surfaces. Bultmann would say that only as the law is clearly understood can the gospel become meaningful. Both agree that Jesus is the Word of God. But whereas Barth makes the distinction between gospel and law in the one Word of God, Bultmann says that it is not until the Word of God comes that it "shows us the law into whose power we have fallen."⁵ It is in Jesus' interpretation of the demand of God that his message is seen to be a protest.⁶ Here the demand of the law and the demand of God are in sharp contrast. The "obedience to the law must be determinable, and therefore law must concern itself with the What of action, not the How."⁷ Thus Jesus could support the Old Testament law. But the novum which he brought was the possibility for the How.

For Bultmann the law must appear before the gospel, to show us the power and character of sin. Sin does not

⁴Barth, "Gospel and Law," p. 71.

⁵Gerhard Ebeling, Theology and Proclamation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 37.

⁶Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), I, 11.

⁷Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus and The Word (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 61f.

"become explicit until man is confronted by the law."⁸
 The purpose of the law is to bring to light the sinfulness of man. This is Paul's insight which determines his teaching on the law, to which Bultmann adheres.⁹ "The ultimate purpose is to lead man to death."¹⁰

Barth would agree with this last statement, but the way in which the law leads man to death would be different. He would not accept the sharp distinction of the law being before gospel.

Jesus Christ being the manifest will of God is the content of the gospel. He is grace. This publication of grace, Gerhard Forde claims, "establishes the law and is to be met by the obedience of faith."¹¹ The way one finally comes to understand the law is on the basis of that which is revealed in Jesus Christ. "From what God does for us, we infer what he wants with us and from us."¹² God's action in Christ is meant to have its goal in our action. It translates the "you must" into "you

⁸Rudolf Bultmann, Primitive Christianity (New York: World, 1956), p. 61.

⁹Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, I, 264f.

¹⁰Ibid., I, 267.

¹¹Gerhard O. Forde, The Law-Gospel Debate (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), p. 139.

¹²Barth, "Gospel and Law," p. 78.

shall be."¹³ This throws us back on the gospel, for it is as one comes to be "in Christ" that he fulfills the law. For Christ is the end of the law.¹⁴

The function of the law is a servant of the gospel, according to Barth. The law being the form and the gospel the content means that one cannot come to understand the law as being outside, either before or behind, the gospel. The gospel has the law within itself. "The revelation of the Law has to serve the revelation of the Gospel."¹⁵ Since the law is within the framework of this gospel, Berkouwer states it "can do no more than function as the form of this Gospel."¹⁶ Through the proclamation of the gospel, law and judgment come into being. For, "only through the power of the Gospel does there arise for us a divinely binding and authoritative Law, and a knowledge of our sin, and therefore of our creatureliness, our distance from God."¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁵ Barth, Church Dogmatics, II, 1:236.

¹⁶ G. C. Berkouwer, The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 325.

¹⁷ Barth, Church Dogmatics, II, 1:349.

Crisis and upheaval is the result of Barth holding to the absolute standards of God and the gospel.¹⁸ This is precisely what Barth hopes for and to that degree respects the accusing function of the law.

But what does God in his law want with us and from us? Barth himself is careful to note "the Law which slays can be made effective only on the basis and in the content of the Gospel which makes alive."¹⁹ When man recognizes his plight he looks to Jesus Christ and sees in his obedience the fulfillment of the law. There he learns that Christ's obedience was for us. Man is called to believe.²⁰ This means to repent. The relationship is made and sustained by faith in Jesus Christ. "This faith includes all obedience."²¹

But what about the traditional formulation "in which the law was defined as God's address to sinful man prior to repentance and faith?"²² Sin consists in man's autocracy and godlessness and as such is a rejection of grace and a display of self-assertiveness against God.²³

¹⁸Thomas F. Torrance, Karl Barth (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 45.

¹⁹Barth, Church Dogmatics, I, 2:852.

²⁰Barth, "Gospel and Law," p. 82. ²¹Ibid., p. 84.

²²Forde, op. cit., p. 140.

²³Barth, "Gospel and Law," p. 85.

Nevertheless God places his gift in our hands. But we misuse and misinterpret the law. We use it as a springboard and try to establish our own righteousness. The result is that the gospel is distorted and corrupted by the law. "The content falls and is corrupted with the form, the Gospel also falls with God's Law."²⁴ Jesus Christ is used as a lever arm or stop gap toward our own justification.²⁵ This is man's righteousness with the gospel as a helper.

Because of Barth's insistence on the unity of the one Word of God he is forced to say of the law, "This is the Law of which it was said and must be said: either entirely the Law and then death, or entirely the Gospel and then life, there is no third possibility."²⁶

Bultmann is not forced into this position since he maintains a sharp distinction between gospel and law. Even though the law does lead to death, it is not to be inferred that it does not contain God's obligatory demand, which is the demand of love.²⁷ The problem is that the law fails to claim the whole man.²⁸ The only way a man

²⁴Ibid., p. 89.

²⁵Ibid., p. 90.

²⁶Ibid., p. 94.

²⁷Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, I, 18.

²⁸Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, p. 68.

can be obedient is by understanding the demand and being able to affirm it from within himself.²⁹ But, says Bultmann, not only is man not able to achieve salvation by works of the law, but he is not even intended to do so. True justification comes by grace alone.³⁰

In the understanding of the law, Bultmann says it takes man to the gospel. If man accepts the Word or kerygma in faith, he is justified by grace, and thus receives the How to fulfill the law. So at the end it is apparent "that even the demand of God embodied in the Law is grace only."³¹

Barth would agree that salvation comes by grace alone. For him this means that God vivifies through the gospel when he kills through the law (the misunderstood law). This is the only place where Barth is willing to admit that the order "Law and Gospel" becomes legitimate. This should not be understood as a concession to criticism. Rather it is the order of death-life. But that means, Barth said, "that it is entirely unintelligible to us as an order. It can only be event and fact and we of ourselves believe it only as the promise of what Jesus Christ does for us."³²

²⁹Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, I, 12.

³⁰Ibid., I, 263. ³¹Ibid., I, 268.

³²Barth, "Gospel and Law," p. 97.

Whereas it is "entirely unintelligible to us" in Barth, that is the only way it is intelligible for us according to Bultmann. The sinner who is in death "is confronted by the gospel when it reaches him with the decision whether or not he is willing to understand himself anew and to receive his life from the hand of God."³³ This reception of life from God is called faith. The object of faith is Jesus Christ. The claim is that "in faith the Christ-event is apprehended as the decisive act of God."³⁴ The object of faith is also called kerygma or gospel.

In summary we must recall that Barth's object was to maintain the unity of the one Word of God. Thus he unified gospel and law as content and form of the one Word of God. True knowledge of God only comes through his revelation in Jesus Christ. The Word of God is spoken to sinners and the gift is placed in their hands. The misuse of the law leads to misunderstanding and corruption of the gospel. However it is still God's law. It must come first so that men will recognize fully the really glad tidings of the gospel. He consented grudgingly to this formulation as a death-life order. But it

³³ Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, I, 269.

³⁴ John B. Cobb, Jr., Living Options in Protestant Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 232.

must never be forgotten that the only legitimate use of the law is that which is seen and understood as God's law.

The essential concern of Bultmann is the relation between Word and faith. The Word is the authority which demands decision and faith and is understood as obedient acceptance.³⁵ Jesus is known as the Word "which brings certainty, this means that we come to know him as the Gospel and the basis of faith."³⁶

Before this, the law plays its part in leading man to the gospel. Bultmann concurs with Ebeling's statement with regard to the relation of law and gospel:

The correct doctrine of law and Gospel has to show in what respect the law precedes the Gospel, but also in what respect the Gospel precedes the law --in such a way, of course, that the order 'Gospel and law' serves to confirm the order 'law and Gospel,' and on no account vice versa.³⁷

Finally, we may ask what are the consequences of reversing the order from law-gospel, to gospel-law. These criticisms will apply essentially to Barth since he has chosen this formulation. We will confine ourselves to enumerating the problem areas rather than elaborating them.

³⁵Ebeling, Theology and Proclamation, p. 37.

³⁶Ibid., p. 79.

³⁷Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 156.

To insist on the unity of the one Word of God in which a distinction can be made as gospel-content, and law-form, is to introduce "an abstract monism into theology and makes it into a philosophical world view of grace."³⁸ This creates a timeless and static idea of love and grace.

In stressing this unity there is a loss of tension between the accusing function of the law and the miracle of the gospel. There is no accusing function because the act of confessing failure is "really intended to be . . . the promise that 'you shall be' what is demanded."³⁹ Destruction and judgment are no longer total, because when God speaks, it is always grace. There is no despair, but a recognition of this grace of God.

This weakens the responsibility which man should take for his actions and deeds. As Helmut Thielicke says, "grace thus becomes a universal Yes (inasmuch as it no longer involves a 'calling out,' an exception), there is strictly speaking . . . no real resistance to the call of grace on man's part. God's yes becomes an all-inclusive yes."⁴⁰ All that man needs to do is recognize that he

³⁸ Helmut Thielicke, Theological Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), I, 96.

³⁹ Ibid., I, 99.

⁴⁰ Ibid., I, 112.

has been justified by the grace of God. There is nothing he can do but accept and gain knowledge.

Perhaps the fundamental error of the unification of gospel and law can be traced to Barth's Christology and his use of history. Rather than beginning with the incarnation he starts with the pre-existent Christ. This means there is never really anything new. The coming of Jesus is a confirmation of the promise of the Old Testament.

Barth understands the Word of God to be over against the Word of man. Therefore, "salvation history . . . becomes merely the historical, allegorical illustration of a timeless idea."⁴¹ This leads to timelessness, elimination of salvation history and to a philosophical world view.

The resulting picture is God in monologue with himself. This is because God takes everything up in himself and is therefore not in tension with the world, everything is subject.

Even with such a brief summary of the results of reversing the order of law and gospel to gospel and law, it becomes obvious that the order is important. That is not to say that by merely following the traditional sequence all problems are automatically eliminated, or that it necessarily means that one will come out

⁴¹Ibid., I, 105.

differently from Barth. It does mean however, that only by following the sequence of law to gospel is it possible to maintain an understanding of law in all of its power, and the gospel with its majesty and grace; on the one hand the Holiness of God, on the other, his Love.

II. THIELICKE'S ARGUMENT FOR THE TRADITIONAL ORDER

We noticed in the previous section that the sequence of law and gospel is an important issue. To reverse the order results in certain inevitable and undesirable consequences. Now we shall see why Thielicke regards the traditional order as an imperative.

Nearly every question which could be raised with regard to the relation of law to gospel could be answered if the following words of Thielicke would remain in our thinking:

We thus maintain the basic Lutheran concern for a sharp distinction between Law and Gospel. Our concern in the first place is to safeguard the miracle in the Gospel whereby God overcomes himself, and his love saves us from the threat of his holiness. Our concern in the second place is to safeguard the historicity of revelation, which would simply be dissolved away into the timelessness of an idea, and therefore of a philosophical world view, were it not for this miracle, this contingent act, datable in the time line by virtue of the Word's having become flesh. Our concern in the third place is to see to it that neither Law nor Gospel is weakened and robbed

of its true character by the attempt to establish a teleological relationship between them, between God's love and God's holiness.⁴²

This gives briefly some of his reasoning, but let us look more carefully at what lies behind his insistence on the sharp distinction between law and gospel.

Thielicke's view is that only a strict separation of law and gospel keeps a conceptual scheme which provides for all of these concerns. The character of the gospel is pure grace. This miracle is lost when the law is understood as the gospel. The law is understood as gospel when we see in the very fact of the law's existence the possibility of its being fulfilled. This leads to a false security, and restricts the gospel in two ways. Either the gospel is thought to be a form of divine assistance designed to empower to better fulfill the law, or the gospel is regarded as an authority which grants us forgiveness even though we have failed to meet the norm. This depreciates the gospel. The miracle of the gospel can only be maintained if it is not confused with the law.⁴³

Another false conception of the law is to regard it as a form to be imitated. This sounds as though the gospel is meant to be an "imitation of Christ," such that only in so far as it is fulfilled is it "good news."

⁴²Ibid., I, 117.

⁴³Ibid., I, 96.

The first confusion leads to false security. The second confusion leads to assaults of doubt.⁴⁴ The secret is the mystery of justification sola gratia. Here, "God protects me against myself and the accusation of my own heart and conscience," he is "Deus defensor against the cor accusator."⁴⁵

On the other hand, it is only when a strict distinction between law and gospel is maintained that it can produce "the kind of theological reflection in which both holiness and love are appropriately expressed and extolled in thought as essential and determinative aspects of the divine majesty."⁴⁶ Love must be seen as a miracle-- something God does, which man cannot match, only accept.

The dialectic between law and gospel and the tension between holiness and love, judgment and grace must be allowed to stand, lest it be resolved in a speculative system. This gives rise to an optimistic Christian world view where love appears as the nature of God. Again, if this dualistic tendency is not sustained it gives way to a pseudo-Christian monism.

So far it can be seen that the sharp distinction and the tension between law and gospel must be preserved in order that the law can be law and the gospel gospel.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., I, 97.

Their unity comes in faith. Faith is not a habitus, not an attribute of existence. It is a movement from God the judge to the God who is gracious to me in Christ.⁴⁷

From our earlier discussion we are now able to see that Thieliicke does not support Barth's sequence of gospel to law. To have to understand the gospel before you understand the law would be to make the gospel law. He would formally agree with Bultmann and his sequence of law before gospel. Bultmann contends that only as the law is clearly understood does the gospel become meaningful. Thieliicke would agree, but he is not a Bultmannian.

Perhaps it would serve our purposes well to see how Thieliicke speaks of the law before the gospel. Bultmann says that the law takes man to the gospel. Thieliicke agrees. But how does it do it and what co-operation must man give? It seems to me that it is here that Thieliicke contributes a distinctive teaching with regard to the law, which maintains its character as law and honors the dignity of man, and at the same time puts the responsibility upon him to respond.

Justification is the decisive act in the life of man, it is 'good news' to know that I can be justified in the sight of God. Out of the event of justification good works arise "automatically."⁴⁸ All of man's responses

⁴⁷Ibid., I, 98.

⁴⁸Ibid., I, 54.

are governed on the basis of his justification. It is easy to misunderstand the meaning of the automatic response. The response is one of love. This does not come from the law, but from the gospel.⁴⁹ It only occurs when a man is brought into a positive relation to God, and cannot be understood by man outside the event of justification.

How can man be brought into a relation with God so that the automatic responses come into being? The law is capable of leading man to that point. In the Bible there are many imperatives "you should," "you ought," which appear confusing and often inconsistent. Thielicke contends that rightly understood, this confusion need not exist.

In the life of the justified there are imperatives, but even these do not interrupt the automatic process. The automatic responses "are actually the reverse side of God's love."⁵⁰ What needs to be distinguished is that the law is also an imperative. This affects man before justification and must not be confused with the imperatives of the justified.

For the unbeliever, the law, as an imperative, has a twofold significance. Thielicke feels that he is being faithful to Paul as he expounds his views. Paul and

⁴⁹Ibid., I, 65.

⁵⁰Ibid., I, 66.

Thielicke feel that the Biblical concept of man is always a relational concept. That is, man always stands in some kind of relation to the Holy Spirit, either positively or negatively.

In Paul, the imperatives refer to man's relationship to the Spirit in two very different ways. The first is the demand to decide for the Spirit.⁵¹ This means that I have an obligation to relate myself to the Spirit. I can decide whether "Spirit" (πνεῦμα) or "flesh" (σάρξ) will be the power which dominates me. This is the element of decision which I cannot avoid. For "the summons to decision has always an imperative significance."⁵²

The object of the first imperative is that of attainment of the right starting point, or as Thielicke states it, "is that we should drink from the right source."⁵³ The object of the imperative is to bring us to the place where the automatic processes can go into operation. Our response is not one of works, but to allow God to work. We are to receive the gift.

The second form of the imperative is the demand to renounce whatever hinders the Spirit. It is necessary to point out again, that we are left to fulfill neither

⁵¹Ibid., I, 84.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., I, 85.

imperative by our own initiative. It is God who works, and not ourselves. The imperative is merely a call for action, but is not able in itself to effect the transition to the new man.⁵⁴ Nevertheless there are certain "prohibitory things" (prohibitiva), that must be removed in order for the work of the Holy Spirit to take place. In other words, there are certain conditions under which the work of the Holy Spirit cannot take place.

Thielicke lifts from the New Testament three prohibitiva which seem to him to be decisive. The first is fornication. This implies bondage to idols, placing oneself under another Lordship. It is a hard either-or decision. "Either we are related to Christ in the relationship of spirit, or we are related to the harlot in the relationship of flesh."⁵⁵

Other sins may be regarded as standing "outside" me. But fornication is a sin of the body (σῶμα) rather than the flesh (σάρξ) so it is not outside me. It is subjection to an alien power. So, Thielicke concludes, fornication is a prohibitivum of the first rank "because it implies, not the mere possibility, but the necessity of my being enslaved by an alien power."⁵⁶

⁵⁴Ibid., I, 86.

⁵⁵Ibid., I, 89.

⁵⁶Ibid., I, 91.

The second prohibitivum is "sitting at the table of demons." The question arises concerning what is lawful. It was first brought to Paul's attention in its relation to the eating of pagan sacrifices. His conclusion was that if one eats the meat sacrificed to idols--if one believes in these idols--it becomes a prohibitivum.⁵⁷ This prohibitivum applies to those actions which not only hamper the growth of faith, but destroy it.

The third group of prohibitiva consists in "denial of the Lord." If we deny God, God will deny us. Faith and the denial of faith are incompatible.

It may now be said that it is possible for any act to take on prohibitory significance. Any action or attitude which hinders or excludes faith or the Spirit may be considered a prohibitive attitude or action.

However, at the same time, it is important to notice that the mere removal of the prohibitiva does not elicit salvation. It consists in clearing the path so the automatic responses can come into being. To summarize the matter more concisely, Thieliicke says "we may say that the New Testament knows no particular disposition for faith. . . . There is, however, a specific disposition against faith, a disposition with which the new man, the new creation, can in no case coexist."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., I, 92f.

So the function of the law for an unbeliever is focused very sharply in the thinking of Thielicke in the twofold imperative, as drinking from the right source, and renouncing whatever hinders the Spirit. It is to remind man that there are certain dispositions against faith, even though there is no particular disposition for faith. This throws man on the mercy of God, where the true miracle of the gospel can be seen in terms of justification.

We noticed earlier that Thielicke agrees with Bultmann formally in the sequence of law and gospel. It becomes clearer now why this progression is a necessity for Thielicke. But there are differences between Thielicke and Bultmann in their use of the law. Bultmann stresses a difference between Jesus' and Paul's use of the law. He then claims Paul's use for himself. Thielicke also claims Paul, but sees no contradiction between Paul and Jesus.

Another difference is in their respective uses of the indicative-imperative. Bultmann does not seem to make the sharp distinction between the use of the imperative in the life of the unbeliever and in the life of the believer. Using Galatians 5:25, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the spirit," he says, "We now

see that the indicative calls forth the imperative."⁵⁹ His conclusion is "that even the demand of God embodied in the Law is grace only."⁶⁰ In his effort to show the unity of the law and gospel he confuses the relative autonomy of each. To say that law is grace is to depreciate the gospel in Thieliicke's thinking. There must be a sharper distinction than Bultmann is making.

Finally, Bultmann's teaching of law does not lead to a need of redemption, but to information. Thieliicke's complaint is that Bultmann's approach appears to him to assume "an all too smooth transition from the self-understanding of man before faith to the self-understanding of man in faith."⁶¹

This criticism can be focused equally on law or gospel. A major premise of Thieliicke is that:

The assertion upon which the unconditional demands of the sermon on the Mount rest (namely that I came intact from the hands of God and must give myself back to him in the same state) constitutes a premise which is alien to the moral consciousness, which it cannot arrive at by itself, and therefore transcends its presuppositions.⁶²

⁵⁹ Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, p. 76.

⁶⁰ Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, I, 268.

⁶¹ Helmut Thieliicke, Between Heaven and Earth (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 151.

⁶² Ibid., p. 52.

This means that when a man really encounters the gospel he leaves different from when he came. He is "changed," "created anew," has become a "new creature," has arrived at a new level of existence.

CHAPTER IV

THE THIRD USE OF THE LAW

I. THE QUESTION REGARDING THE THIRD USE OF THE LAW

If we trace the genesis of the modern law-gospel debate to the Reformation, we discover shortly a question arising as to the uses of the law. It emerged first in the form of the duplex usus legis, or in reference to the primus usus legis and the secundus usus legis. The first use is known as the political use of the law and refers to the accomplishment of external works. It comprises the whole of the law of God and must be kept by the believer. However, it forces an outward righteousness on the despisers of the law. The second use of the law may be identified as the accusing law of God. It defines the relation between the law and the person. Its function is to lead the person to recognize that he is in opposition to the law and is condemned for it.

Later the question was, is there a triplex usus legis, or a tertius usus legis? The third use of the law claims the law as God's help in the performance of the works which are commanded. As well as being a rule of conduct it serves as a punishment for the flesh, which is still alive even in the life of the believer.

The question of the third use of the law is a crucial one for contemporary theology. This question causes us to look at the foundations of our theology. If we are indecisive at this point, the result will be to pursue one of two errors. The first would be to make the gospel appear as law. This was one of the criticisms of Barth's position. To create a new legalism only adds fuel to the flame. It does not bring the freedom from bondage which is promised. If the second error is pursued, antinomianism flourishes. All judgments and decisions are left to the subjective conscience. Freedom becomes a master; I have created a new bondage for myself.

It must be said here that this problem has not been discussed at length, and where it has been discussed, the problems have not been resolved with any degree of consistency. The result has been that the third use of the law is accepted completely or rejected totally. The issues will become clearer as we proceed.

The term usus legis as a theological concept seems to have been coined by Martin Luther. Gerhard Ebeling traces its development between 1519 and 1535, or the two dates on which Luther published his commentaries on Galatians.¹ Ground seems to have been broken for such a

¹Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 72.

use by I Timothy 1:8, "Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully." However, Luther's use lies deeper than the scriptural stimulus.

In the Reformation understanding of justification by faith alone and in the distinction of law and gospel, the way was prepared for understanding the usus legis as specifically duplex. But it was not until after 1531 that the term usus legis was regularly employed as a theological category.²

Melanchthon was the first systematically to develop the doctrine of the triplex usus legis. According to Ebeling, "it meets us for the first time in the 1535 edition which introduces the secunda aetas of the Loci."³ The use of the terminology of usus legis in Luther struck a response in Melanchthon, and he adopted the category. He was at first dependent on Luther's double use of the law, but later he remodelled it to suit his doctrine of the law and fit it into his scheme of the three uses of the law.⁴

Luther himself uses the theme of the triplex on two different occasions, but Ebeling contends that they give no support to the later doctrine. The threefold use of the law of which Luther speaks relates to the question

²Ibid., p. 74.

³Ibid., p. 62.

⁴Ibid., p. 74.

of fulfilling the law. "Some do not keep it at all, others only externally, a third group both inwardly and outwardly."⁵ But Luther's third use is much different from that developed by Melanchthon. Luther's view is:

Whoever seeks to preach the law rightly must observe these three distinctions, so as on no account to preach the law to the third group as if they could be saved thereby; for that would be corruption.⁶

The mention of the threefold use of the law is inserted parenthetically, according to Ebeling, and only expresses a passing thought which is immediately dropped.

However, Melanchthon felt he would do Luther no injustice by developing the third use of the law. It evolved gradually in Melanchthon's thinking from 1521 on, but the issue is sharpened by 1527. He defines two methods of preaching the law and moves from the terminology duplex usus legis, to the doctrine of the triplex usus legis.

It is impossible to speak at length of Melanchthon's theological development, since there has been no careful study of the texts published in his lifetime. However, there has been enough to raise the issue of the third use of the law in Lutheran theology.

The whole question concerning the third use of the law drives us back to reconsider the meaning of the law.

⁵Ibid., p. 64.

⁶Ibid.

Given different shades of meaning, different results accrue. Luther equates God's Word with gospel, man's word with law. This means that to speak of a third use of the law would be to let man speak again. Man cannot be his own master and at the same time be the servant of God. The Pauline concept of law (*νόμος*) normally refers to the Torah.⁷ The Reformers, on the other hand, understood the law as that which concerns every man as man. So it becomes altogether important to know what we mean by law in order to know if it has any application to the life of the believer.

Luther defines man as being the object of the law. If man thus fulfills the law, the proper function is fulfilled and it no longer has any use. It continues to exist of course, but it has fulfilled its destructive function. The man who is a believer is no longer the object of the law.

Nevertheless, Luther would not deny that the law has a disciplinary function, but he connects this with the usus theologicus. Closely connected with this is the question as to whether the content of the law also provides a teaching function.

Before we can understand the various uses, it is necessary to ask who is the subject of the use of the law?

⁷Ibid., p. 262.

Is it God, as the author of the law, or man, to whom the law applies? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, asking this question, answers it by quoting from the *Epitomae*, which is the first part of the Formula Concordiae:

Thus both for the penitent and for the impenitent, both for men who are born again and for men who are not born again, the law is and remains one and the same law, namely, the unalterable will of God, and the difference, so far as obedience is concerned, lies solely in the men themselves; for one who has not been born again performs the law as it is required of him, but he does it under compulsion and against his will (as do also those who are born again according to the flesh). The believer, however, without compulsion and willingly, if he has been born again, does what no threat of the law could ever force from him.⁸

The active subject is God. So the preaching of the law is not simply to be understood as different ways of preaching or using the law, but as various effects the same law has on man.

From this it is evident that when speaking of the use of the law, whether it is in its first, second or third mode, we are always speaking of the same law, the law of God. The distinction among the three uses does not, however, relate to a chronological succession in the proclamation or to two fundamentally distinct classes of men, believers and unbelievers.⁹ We shall see that the

⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 303f.

⁹Ibid., p. 305.

different uses apply in varying degrees to both classes of men.

In what way does the law still apply to the believer? This question prompted the process which led to making distinctions within the same law of God.

All that was implied in chapter III with regard to the accusing function of the law can be regarded as the second use of the law, or the theological use. This use concerns the knowledge of sins. It defines the relation between the law of God and a person. It is meant to lead a person to recognize that he is in opposition to the law and is condemned for it.¹⁰ It is crisis, guilt, the recognition that I can do nothing to right myself with God. In the end it leads to death.

At this point man must make a decision. He chooses to continue his unauthentic existence in this spiraling contraction of guilt, until it squeezes the life out of him, or he throws himself on the mercies of God and by sola fide is justified sola gratia. Thus he fulfills the law by being alive in Christ, who is the end of the law. The fulfillment is living a life of Love. It appears that the believer no longer has any use for the law. Understood in this manner, it is seen only in its accusing function.

¹⁰Ibid.

The first use of the law concerns the establishment of a disciplina externa et honestas,¹¹ and is also known as the usus civilis or usus politicus. Ebeling says this use of the law is one "which forces an outward righteousness on the insolent despisers of the law."¹² It has reference to the contents of the law and to the accomplishments of certain particular external works.

Bonhoeffer is very much interested in the first use of the law, not as an autonomous entity, but in its relation and unity to the second use and the gospel. The entire decalogue is the content of the first use, in fact the whole law. However, the law is not to be found only in the decalogue; it runs through the entire New Testament.¹³

The purpose of the first use of the law pertains to outward discipline. As such it is designed to establish iustitia civilis.¹⁴ This also is the will of God. It is not proclaimed in isolation, but with the end of the gospel in view. "God desires the outward order not only because the gospel exists but also in order that it may exist."¹⁵ This use of the law is valid for all men.

¹¹Ibid. ¹²Ebeling, op. cit., p. 64.

¹³Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 307.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 308. ¹⁵Ibid., p. 314.

There is no distinction in application between believer and non-believer. However, Ebeling says that while the law is certainly at work in the civil or political use, unbelievers do not understand it that way. "Only the believer is able to use the law in the usus civilis in such a way that the result is not at the same time an abusus legis. To that extent the knowledge of the usus theologicus precedes the knowledge of the usus civilis."¹⁶ Here is verification of the fact that we cannot understand the various uses of the law in a chronological sequence. In fact Ebeling contends that it really is a "distinction in the execution of the preaching of the law within the usus theologicus."¹⁷

It is important that we understand the differences between the first and second uses of the law in order to distinguish the peculiar nature of the third use of the law. The question we are concerned with is whether this is a legitimate use of the law. The third use of the law, in the words of Bonhoeffer, may be understood as a "rule of conduct for converts and as a punishment for the flesh, which is still alive even in them."¹⁸ It defines the law as God's help in the performance of the works which are commanded.

¹⁶Ebeling, op. cit., p. 305.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁸Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 305.

With such a background of understanding it is possible to make several observations. First, it is possible to understand that the first and second uses of the law do not have to be understood chronologically. However, since a believer is subsequent to an unbeliever, the third use of the law would have to be understood as coming after the first two. Secondly, it is generally agreed that even a believer is not perfect. This means that he is still in need of guidance, assistance and instruction. What provides this guidance? Thirdly, if Love is the fulfillment of the law, would not a continuing interference of the law impose a new legalism? Is there not a danger that even Love itself can become a new law? Finally, we may ask about Christian freedom. Did not Paul himself say "before faith came, we were confined under the law . . . But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian"? (Gal. 3:23, 25).

These questions do not lend themselves to simple answers. They require another look at the meaning of the law. Our object is to find out what and who gives assistance to the life of the believer, and at the same time to preserve the freedom which is given to him in his new life in Christ.

Ebeling considers himself to be a faithful interpreter of Luther, and his claim is that the law is primarily an event and only as a makeshift does it provide

any teaching.¹⁹ If this be true, then we cannot right-fully speak of a third use of the law. Using Ebeling as a representative of those who would deny the third use of the law, we may ask in what way they understand the believer to be instructed. The other question we want to consider is closely related; what is meant by freedom from the law?

When the third use of the law is rejected it is felt that all that is needed is found in the first two uses. Not everyone would fully share Ebeling's view that the law does not provide any teaching. Even those who agree recognize a difference between teaching and guidance or instruction. Teaching savors of a certain content to be memorized, whereas guidance or instruction has a certain flexibility. Since all agree that even a believer must maintain a penitent attitude, the law may still be understood to have validity for all men.

According to Ebeling, Luther only affirmed two uses of the law, the political and the theological. In the theological understanding they must be distinguished, but in preaching they are interwoven.²⁰ For the law applies equally to all men. It is not as if the entire law applies to unbelievers and another type of law is applied to believers alone.

¹⁹Ebeling, op. cit., p. 278.

²⁰Ibid., p. 77.

This does not mean that Luther did not recognize different types of men to whom the law has to be preached in different ways. He distinguished between the pious and the impious. But the distinction in preaching to these two groups of men is not between the first and the second or the second and the third uses of the law, but according to Ebeling, is a "case of a distinction in the execution of the preaching of the law within the usus theologicus."²¹

Bonhoeffer feels that it is in the first use of the law that the believer is reminded of his sin. The first use comprises the whole of the decalogue, contains both the threat and the promise, and is addressed to the transgressor and the performer of the law.²² This is so because "there is no proclamation which is only for the unbelievers but only a proclamation which is intended also for the unbelievers. There is no theological basis for a clear division of men into two classes."²³

Such an explanation provides practically the same service as would a clearcut statement supporting the third use of the law. However, this does not solve the problem of the believer's freedom from the law.

²¹Ibid.

²²Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 305.

²³Ibid., p.311f.

Freedom from the law can be understood only in so far as it is made clear that it is the law of God. This can be recognized in Christ, for Christ is the end of the law. If we look at the law as being something over against God, then still to use it in a valid way would not be freedom from it at all.

But freedom is opened up in Christ through faith. Christ fulfilled the law. As we are in Him, we fulfill the law. What we are free from is the power of the law as it led to despair and death. Furthermore, it is Christ who brings faith, and as long as we continue in that faith we remain free from the law.²⁴

Man now is in a relation to God which is realized in Jesus Christ. Since the law is God's law, man is on God's side, not against him. Bonhoeffer makes a distinction between obedience and freedom. Man is called to be obedient, but the imperative of obedience alone is an uncompromising law. However, man is also called to be free. Jesus stands before God as being both obedient and free. So a correct understanding of what is meant by obedience and freedom leads to the meaning of freedom from the law. Bonhoeffer states that:

Obedience without freedom is slavery; freedom without obedience is arbitrary self-will. Obedience restrains freedom; and freedom ennobles obedience.

²⁴Ebeling, op. cit., p. 280.

Obedience binds the creature to the Creator and freedom enables the creature to stand before the Creator as one who is made in His image.²⁵

It is impossible to have freedom or even to understand its meaning without some structure within which to operate. In the dialectic of obedience and freedom man both obeys and is free from the law. According to Luther, in obedience man adheres to the decalogue, and in freedom he creates new decalogues.

It must be admitted that there are certain difficulties in using the law in the third sense. Earlier we supported the traditional order of law-gospel, pointing out that the reverse order depreciates the gospel. Another criticism may be that to use the law in the third sense necessitates such a radical modification that it has little or no relationship to what is ordinarily meant by the term.²⁶ Then of course, there is the danger of imposing a new kind of legalism.

We may close this section with a few comments of our own. Barth had difficulty with his gospel to law sequence in that the obligation was upon him to redefine what he meant. In the sense that he had the law following the gospel he had a third use. He was

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 252.

²⁶ Gerhard O. Forde, The Law-Gospel Debate (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), p. 226.

criticized sharply for this. On the other hand, some of his critics proceed in their own way to delineate a third use.

There are three ways that the third use of the law is treated. The first is simply to affirm it and to develop one's theology accordingly. The second is to deny its use, but develop the second use in such a way as to serve the same function. The third way is again to deny it and to proceed by saying the New Testament is the fulfillment of the law and develop one's theology on the basis of love or faith or whatever else seems central to one's thought.

My complaint is that there seems to be an inconsistency on the part of many who criticize the third use of the law. Admittedly, safeguards must be constructed. But when this results in mere semantic juggling the conclusions are less than convincing.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF THE PEDAGOGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LAW FOR BELIEVERS

We have seen that the tertius usus legis can be understood as a "rule of conduct for converts and as a punishment for the flesh, which is still alive even in them."²⁷ It defines the law as God's help in the

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 305.

performance of the works which are commanded. Opponents of the third use of the law say that all of what the third use claims for itself may be found in the first two uses of the law. To advocate a use of the law especially for believers is to introduce a new legalism and depreciate the miracle of God's grace. They agree that the believer is still in need of guidance, but disagree as to how that guidance is affected.

Those who support the third use of the law claim that the freedom of which the New Testament speaks is freedom from the accusing nature of the law. The believer is free from the power of the law which kills. In Christ I have freedom. I choose my obedience, which takes the form of Love.

In this section we shall see how Thielicke makes use of Luther's thought while at the same time developing his own 'third' use of the law which he calls the "continuing pedagogic significance" of the law for believers. In this way he answers many of the problems raised in the previous section concerning the teaching or guiding function of the law for the believer. Next we will turn to the problem of freedom, to see if the law presents a threat in its continuing relation to the believer. Finally, criticism of Thielicke will be made on the basis of my understanding of his thoughts on these issues.

All of Christian ethics has to do with the interim time between the Fall and the Parousia. The Christian's existence is one of tension between being in the world and not being of the world or between continuity and discontinuity.²⁸ During this time the law is in effect as the will of God. It is set in tension with the gospel or the gift of God. However, it is not a simple matter to determine the will of God in a particular concrete situation. As Thielicke says, "while the commandments demand faith and obedience, concrete reality confronts us with the necessity of interpretation and evaluation."²⁹ This does not have to do simply with the political use of the law, but also applies to matters of faith.

Thielicke does not define the third use as such, but he does describe how it works. It does not have merely a teaching function, nor is it simply a variation of the theological use of the law. It is rather seen as a help in the life of the believer without an accusing function. It is true that he uses the word 'pedagogic' with reference to the third use, but it comprises more than just what is normally envisioned as a schoolmaster. It includes the broader area of assistance and guidance.

²⁸ Helmut Thielicke, Theological Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), I, 43.

²⁹ Helmut Thielicke, The Freedom of the Christian Man (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 149.

Furthermore, Thieliicke does not claim that he teaches or advocates the third use of the law. However, it is clear that while he may agree with Ebeling that Luther never used the third use as Melanchthon taught, it does not mean that it is improper to teach the third use today. Luther had reasons for his views that are different from those which we face.

Luther speaks of the abiding significance of the law for the imperfect Christian. Thieliicke agrees but thinks that is too mild for the twentieth century. The situation to which Luther addressed himself is different from ours. In our "age of discontinuity" the complex nature of the ego unveils itself in the struggle for autonomy of the various spheres. The argument is that in one sector man can be a Christian, in another a businessman, in another a politician. It is against such a backdrop that the law is still necessary. It serves as reminder that all spheres are to be related to our sonship.³⁰ It is stated in the following:

The Law retains its significance because, from the human standpoint, the Christian state is always incomplete and in process of becoming. The Law serves to relate the individual spheres and stages of existence to the fact of justification. It is thus a

³⁰Thieliicke, Theological Ethics, I, 132f.

countermeasure to combat the constant disintegration of Christian life and its objective hypocrisy. It is a constant reminder of the real theme of our justified existence.³¹

In terms of the law-gospel dialectic and the third use of the law, Thielicke shows how it works in the following way:

It is a law of God's intercourse with us, however, that first of all something is given to us, and only then are demands made upon us, that first comes the indicative establishment of the new creature, and then the imperative appeal comes to us.³²

Before love is commanded, we learn to love by being loved. That is, our love springs into being as a result of our new creation.

What Thielicke is trying to protect himself against is what is known in modern sociological terms as the loyalty of the functionary to his function. To become a functionary is to be a deserter from responsibility. The Christian is called to be responsible. The functionary takes the route of least resistance, which is to carry out orders, rather than make personal decisions and choices. When personal commitments (to God, for the Christian) are given up, power to resist evil is lost, and all that remains in my possession is the power to

³¹Ibid., I, 133.

³²Thielicke, The Freedom of the Christian Man, p. 158.

carry out orders.³³ Seen against this backdrop, the framework within which Thieliicke develops his third use of the law will be easier for us to understand.

The importance of justification by faith in Thieliicke's teaching cannot be omitted. Justification has both a qualitative and a quantitative aspect. From its qualitative standpoint, it is perfect from the very first. This is God's work. It cannot be improved or transcended. It qualifies a man definitively and absolutely.³⁴ But does the perfect tense of justification (qualitative aspect) negate progression in the life of the believer? Thieliicke does not think so. Rather it implies change, struggle and growth, or "being justified more and more."³⁵

Within the quantitative aspect of justification, Thieliicke distinguishes, with Luther, between three types of perspective within justification. First, we look to God as the object of our faith. It is the looking away from ourselves as we "creep into Christ."³⁶ Second, we look at ourselves. This is the accusing function of the

³³ Helmut Thieliicke, Nihilism (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 80.

³⁴ Thieliicke, Theological Ethics, I, 127.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

law. It leads us to despair and uncertainty. From here it is difficult to know "whether" we believe.³⁷

But the third perspective within justification is to turn my gaze away from the object of faith back upon myself. I now see myself in a new relationship to God. I stand before the justifying God. This does not send me to despair, but to repentance. The result is that "this third perspective thus places me at what for me is not the end, but the beginning, the point from which I have to advance."³⁸

So the key word in the quantitative aspect of justification is "advance." This progress in the Christian faith, this growth, is called "sanctification."³⁹ But this process does not begin until one has become justified. "Growth in sonship can take place only after I am a son."⁴⁰

It is at this point that the validity of the law for the believer arises. Do we stand at the beginning of justification or at the end? Have we fully crept into Christ? If so we have no need of the law. But, has this actually been accomplished?

³⁷ Ibid., I, 128.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., I, 129.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Luther's response to the Antinomians who claimed that "the Law is not laid down for the just," is: "To the extent that they are that."⁴¹ In other words, in so far as a man has found liberation from the law in his Christian state, it is not to be interjected anew. But liberation is not something complete and perfect.⁴²

One of the major contentions of Thielicke with regard to justification and the continuing significance of the law is:

we would have to agree that it makes sense to have flashing red lights on both sides of the path we have to tread, as reminders that it runs through alien territory and is flanked by deep abysses. We are redeemed children of God, but there are unredeemed areas in us.⁴³

The 'flashing red light' is the law. The 'unredeemed area' refer to those individual spheres of life that are not related to sonship. In other words, the event of sonship does not guarantee that all the departments of my ego are integrated in this new existence.⁴⁴

Another metaphor Thielicke uses is the law as a sheep dog which keeps the flock to the path of the shepherd. But the shepherd does the leading, not the dog. This is an important distinction. It echoes what has

⁴¹Ibid., I, 130.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., underlining mine.

⁴⁴Ibid., I, 131.

already been pointed out, that the law has not changed, but man's relation to it has. He is not forced to do something against his will. The law is his desire.

Given the obedience of the believer in the life of justification, the law is understood first of all as a loving reminder. This is the regulative aspect which reminds one of the way my obedience is to take. It is an aid to the new man in showing him the full range of new possibilities in his new existence.

We may say that the law relates to the ethical or moral 'blindspots' in a man's life. There are areas of our life (or ego) which are not immediately caught up in this movement, even though the whole man is the object of justification. Therefore, "the Law must . . . make clear that those other areas too are intended, that they too are related to the theme of justification."⁴⁵

There are thus two aspects of the law. The first is the accusing law from which we have been delivered. The other is the law which we are impelled to fulfill by the Holy Spirit. The latter law is one which is valid but no longer condemns.

Thielicke justifies his third use of the law theologically by asserting that in the new creaturehood of

⁴⁵ Ibid., I, 135.

the justified, the law is fulfilled in so far as we believe and fulfill the First Commandment. However, we are not to suppose that the whole of our life is related to our believing. The second table of the law is not something to be added but is an exposition of the first table in the plurality of life's relationships. It aids us in actualizing the law in all the spheres of our existence.⁴⁶ So in the 'loving reminder' role which the law plays it should be regarded as a helper rather than a condemning judge.

The law in the life of the believer also acts as a comfort in time of doubt. This is a warning against looking for certain spiritual phenomena in myself which may have the effect of assuring my faith. Faith cannot be understood in terms of psychology. This places the emphasis on myself rather than on God.⁴⁷

Doubts arise because I look at myself and regard God's work as taking place in me. According to Thielicke this is an introversion. We are called to seek God, not ourselves. The law points away from our weakness to God's imperative to "Seek ye my face" (Ps. 27:8), and to be strong and of good courage (Josh. 1:7,9).⁴⁸

⁴⁶Ibid., I, 138.

⁴⁷Ibid., I, 139.

⁴⁸Ibid., I, 140.

Luther stubbornly bases his faith in the First Commandment because God so willed it. So it becomes his final court of appeal in time of doubt, and from it he finds his comfort.⁴⁹

The final way in which Thielicke regards the law as useful to a believer is as a servant of love in the political sphere. This is what we have already designated as the usus politicus or the primus usus legis. Since most regard this use of the law as valid for believers it is not necessary to labor the point here. To show how this dovetails with the uses mentioned in this section, Thielicke would identify the usus politicus, in part, with the "unredeemed" and autonomous spheres of the ego.⁵⁰

In our endeavor to understand the third use of the law we must not divorce ourselves from the matter of freedom. Law and freedom are not mutually exclusive but work hand in hand. Thielicke quotes Henrik Steffens, "We call free that which is itself in inner harmony with its nature."⁵¹ Thielicke goes on to say that freedom is possible only when the self acts spontaneously and of its

⁴⁹ Ibid., I, 141.

⁵⁰ Ibid., I, 146.

⁵¹ Thielicke, The Freedom of the Christian Man, p. 13.

own free will and when it is used for the purpose of self-fulfillment.⁵²

Freedom therefore, can be understood only within the confines of certain limitations. To have unrestricted freedom is to yield to a worse kind of tyranny which becomes a law or bondage. It is the direct opposite of freedom. Thus a correct doctrine of freedom consists in the balance of freedom and limitation.⁵³

Real freedom--"to become what one should"--may be defined as:

a definite form of bondage or obligation, in a word, as what one should do. Real freedom is a bondage and nothing else. The chains of unfreedom are broken, not primarily by liberation from bonds, but rather by entering into a genuine commitment to, and acceptance of, obligations that sustain one's very existence.⁵⁴

The responsibility rests with man's decision and commitment. Since there is an ideal goal of human existence, the decision is either a right one or a wrong one. The human goal imposes upon us the imperative to strive for it, but at the same time we also know that we possess the freedom to achieve it. Thieliicke puts it this way: "The obligation to strive for self-realization "empowers" us to achieve freedom. Underlying the ability to be free is therefore an act of empowerment."⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

What is this empowerment for the Christian and what is its result? It lies within the gift of God's grace as seen in justification. Man is no longer enslaved under the law, but is a responsible child of God. So the response is the spontaneity of love.⁵⁶

So far we may say that human freedom is always a freedom that is bound. Man has the choice as to that which will bind him, but no power over that which binds him. His being possesses primacy over his will.

To this extent man is helpless at the point of the real and ultimate theme of his life, since his will must always run back in a circle to his given existential situation and therefore must always end in religious, philosophical, and ethical forms of self-confirmation.⁵⁷

Man can be liberated from this vicious circle only if he is given a new being, which provides a new will. This is what occurs in justification sola gratia. He has received a new "ability to be" which came from outside himself. Man's choice is between bondage to the Father, which makes him free, or bondage to the power of this world, which enslaves him. "Only he who finds God finds himself."⁵⁸

We may now ask if the law as a loving reminder is in tension with freedom. According to Thielicke, freedom is the capacity to become what one should. It is a new

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 18.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 28.

bondage. Since man has chosen to become a believer, he has been adopted as a son, and has taken upon himself the new bondage of obedience. He has freely chosen his bonds and is free to operate within them. Thus, for Thielicke, the law is not in tension with freedom.

But what about Paul? In Galatians he constantly warns against being bound again with the yoke of slavery (the law). We have been set free and we should stand fast in that freedom (Galatians 5:1). Yet, in other places (I Cor. 9:19ff), he indicates that he is not in a completely negative relation to the law. The point again is that he is in a new relation with it.

I feel that Thielicke is successful in showing how the law has continuing significance for the believer. He is aware of the problems of legalism and antinomianism. In fact he raises the issues in order to show how his viewpoint differs. He weaves his theological argument carefully so that he appears quite consistent within his own framework and method.

I have designated his treatment of the continuing significance of the law for the believer as the third use of the law. Even so, I feel that my survey has been faithful to the teachings of Thielicke. I do not feel that he would be disappointed. While I support the third use of the law and appreciate Thielicke's development of

it, I nevertheless feel that it is necessary to offer certain criticisms.

There are two points where we may raise questions. The first concerns Thielicke's definition of sanctification. On the one hand it looks as though sanctification is meant to be active. He speaks of "works," and the motive for works in the life of the justified. On the other hand he uses it passively as "letting happen" in me the process of the resurrection of Christ.⁵⁹ The third use of the law, as we have defined it, could be understood to aid progress, either by helping to know what works to perform or by knowing what to let happen in me.

Sanctification is not understood as a separate work but becomes a process which helps us to become more and more justified. It would be more intelligible to take what Thielicke calls the qualitative aspect of justification to be justification per se and the quantitative aspect to be sanctification per se. This may be his intention. If so, he does not explain clearly. Rather one gets the feeling that there is not as much growth and advance or progress in the Christian life as Thielicke proclaims.⁶⁰

⁵⁹Thielicke, Theological Ethics, I, 128.

⁶⁰Ibid., cf. I, 98.

My interpretation would not be unjust to Thieliicke's definition of faith as movement. This can occur in sanctification also. It does presuppose another view of justification. Thieliicke argues against justification as a perfect state or habitus. This is the reason he must hold the view he does. However, I feel that this is where he makes his mistake. In so far as a man is justified by faith, it is perfect--qualitatively. This is an act of God upon which we will not improve. However, in sanctification, as the law of God leads and we willingly obey and follow, we set ourselves aside for God or consecrate ourselves, and God sanctifies. We thus grow in faith. As we do, the magnetic field of Adam becomes weaker.

The second point regards the matter of assurance. It seems that all that Thieliicke has is that which is based stubbornly and rationally on the first commandment. This is so external that the result is a constant pumping up of a deflated faith. To advocate 'internal' assurance is not to give way to private revelations and the severance from reason. Rather to be 'in Christ' or to become a 'new creature' is such a radical re-orientation that it does not leave the ego untouched. If the ego or I am altered, this presupposes that my letting this happen to me has not been completely devoid of rational considera-

tion and swamped by emotional phenomena. To know (οἶδα) can mean, not only to know theoretically, but to have a positive relationship to (II Cor. 5:16).⁶¹ The law can be used as a comfort in time of doubt without destroying the positive relationship or 'assurance' that we are sons of God.

⁶¹Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 558.

CHAPTER V

THE RELATION OF CONSCIENCE TO LAW AND GOSPEL

I. THE POINT OF THE DEBATE

The study of conscience is an important one in relation to the study of law and gospel. The nature of conscience is a confused issue in the minds of most people and what is more, the conscience itself is confused. Our object is to try to understand what the conscience is, and its relation to the law and gospel.

We may ask the question if there is any debate regarding the conscience. I do not presume to enter into psychological considerations here. Our interests are theological. The problem can be narrowed to the distinction between the conscience and the law. Is the conscience law? Does it function as the third use of the law? If this is in fact the case, a separate study is not justified.

This is the point of the debate. There is a fine line which separates the function of the conscience from the function of the law. That line is not always made clear; the issue is often clouded. The purpose of this chapter is to determine the nature of the conscience and its role as an individual entity in its encounter with the law and the gospel.

It may be said that the consciences of men are today in crisis. In enumerating some of the chief problems of Protestant theology in the present day, Gerhard Ebeling lists the crisis of the conscience as a factor. He says that this is a crisis

in which man no longer allows himself to be truly bound by any claim or to be truly comforted by any promise, because in his very depths a speechlessness has taken possession of him, manifesting itself as boredom, or despair, or neutralization, or the absence of conscience, the profundity of which could almost be interpreted as the death of language.¹

Men have lost their sense of direction and have been reduced to the dullness of the mass. In the acceleration of secularization there has been a general loss of tradition and a fading sense of reality. Man has lost his identity, he has become anonymous.

The Greek word for conscience is *συνείδησις*. Bultmann tells us that the word originally meant "joint knowledge (*συν-εἰδησις*) with another."² By Paul's time it had come to mean knowledge shared with one's self. Ebeling says that *συνείδησις* "points to the fact that the root of the phenomenon of conscience lies in the

¹Gerhard Ebeling, "The Chief Problems of Protestant Theology in the Present," Journal For Theology and the Church, III (1967), 159.

²Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), I, 216.

basic ontological determination of man as the being whose relation to himself is that of joint cognizance."³ The conscience cannot be understood as an organ, or in terms of subject-object, or again, as an authority over against man. "Strictly man does not 'have' a conscience, but he is conscience."⁴ Ebeling goes so far as to suggest that "the hermeneutical principle is man as conscience."⁵ In other words, the way that man is to be understood is to understand the workings of the conscience. Man is his own witness.

To back up for just a moment, it will help us to see how Paul relates the conscience to other aspects of the 'self.' He uses two other words which are closely connected with the conscience. They are soma (body), and nous (mind). As soma, man makes himself object. He can speak of having a relationship to himself, a subject to whom something happens.⁶ Nous has the meaning of being a specific self. It is the subject of its own willing and doing. Bultmann concludes, "the nous, . . . is man's

³ Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 417.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gerhard Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutic," in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (eds.) The New Hermeneutic (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 110.

⁶ Bultmann, op. cit., I, 195.

real self in distinction from his soma, the self which has become objectivized in relation to himself."⁷ Nous is understanding will, with the alternative of being for God or against him.

One of the functions of the nous is that of 'proving' or 'making a judgment.' This can be used broadly, as approving, testing, self-condemnation, discriminating judgment, judgment concerning a course to be chosen, deciding, or even judgment about a person.⁸

Συνείδησις is also a term for "understanding" and "knowing" but with a much more specialized function. As Bultmann says:

Unlike nous, it is not a state of mind that includes an intent but one that, reflecting and judging, scrutinizes precisely this intent of one's own mind. Conscience judges; i.e. it is a knowledge about one's own conduct in respect to a requirement which exists in relation to that conduct.⁹

Thus conscience is man's knowledge of his own conduct. It is the knowledge of good and evil, the judgment of past actions, the knowledge of unfulfilled duties of the future.

It now becomes possible to see how the conscience could be in crisis. Seeing that the conscience can be called the 'self,' we may ask how reliable a guide it is?

⁷Ibid., I, 212.

⁸Ibid., I, 214ff.

⁹Ibid., I, 217.

There are ample indications that the confusion of voices in our time does not automatically cause us to be in unity with ourselves. It is possible that the conscience and the will can be in opposition, and furthermore, it is possible for the will to overpower the conscience so that it is repressed. This is one of the gravest threats to our existence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that all of Christian ethics is agreed that it "can never be advisable to act against one's own conscience."¹⁰ It is easy to agree, assuming that the conscience is Christian. But what about the 'unredeemed' conscience? Bonhoeffer understands the conscience to be "the call of human existence to unity with itself."¹¹ Given that definition, it would never be advisable to act against it, redeemed or unredeemed.

Bonhoeffer also sees the conscience as an indictment against the loss of this unity and as a warning against the loss of one's self. It is directed more towards a mode of being than towards a kind of doing. It "protests against a doing which imperils the unity of this being with itself."¹² The task of man is constantly to assert the unity of selfhood in the face of dehumanizing

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 242.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

tendencies in society. The struggle is internal, with himself, and external, with the world.

The question of conscience becomes one of identity of man with himself. Ebeling says that this is an identity which is never finally given but always demanded. Man's response constitutes his responsibility.¹³ His ability to answer for his past, to make decisions regarding his future possibilities, is all a part of identifying with himself.

The matter of the unity of selfhood and the identity of ourselves with ourselves can be aided by seeing how the law and gospel relate to the conscience.

The call of conscience arises from the imperilling of a man's unity with himself. But what constitutes this unity? It is the nature of the ego to strive to be at one with itself. The conscience knows what is demanded of man. The conscience is a universal human phenomenon (Rom. 2:15). The law is "written on their hearts."

While it is possible for the conscience to recognize the demand, it can err in regard to the content of that demand. Furthermore, it must be recognized that the autonomy of man's own ego constantly strives for self-justification. That is, it seeks to conform with a law

¹³Ebeling, Word and Faith, p. 418.

of its own finding.¹⁴ This conformity can assume different forms, but the transgression of it brings disunity with himself.

Man finds unity with himself by finding a foundation for the unity of his own ego somewhere beyond himself. The accusing law drives him to recognize this. All attempts at unity with himself, of himself, have failed. The search for a foundation outside himself leads into a sphere transcendent to man. Thus the usus theologicus has performed its function.

This focus or foundation outside ourselves is variously described. However, for the Christian it is found, as Bonhoeffer describes it, "through the miracle of faith, beyond the man's own ego and its law, in Jesus Christ."¹⁵ It is in Jesus that I find the unity of my life. This is grace, it is gospel. It is the good news that Jesus Christ is the reconciler, not only of man with God, and of man with man, but of man with himself.

This does not mean that the conscience is robbed of its function. Rather its new function is brought into existence by its new orientation. Bonhoeffer states:

When Christ, true God and true man, has become the point of unity of my existence, conscience will indeed still formally be the call of my actual being

¹⁴Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 243.

¹⁵Ibid.

to unity with myself, but this unity cannot now be realized by means of a return to the autonomy which I derive from the law; it must be realized in fellowship with Jesus Christ.¹⁶

In other words, the conscience is no longer bound by its own legalism, but has found new freedom, since in Christ I am in unity with myself. In fact, "Jesus Christ has become my conscience."¹⁷ True freedom consists not in the defense of my own actions, but in service to God and to my fellow men.

The freedom which the gospel brings must be understood in terms of its relation to the law. Ebeling tells us that the "Gospel is the radical transposition of man which takes place in the conscience and by which he comes as one under the law, to stand 'supra legem.'"¹⁸ This we can agree with, but at the same time, total disregard for the law can only give rise to irresponsibility. The 'freedom from the law' of which we speak is that law which leads to death. The law under which we now operate is the law of Love for God. This is also described in the decalogue, and in the sermon on the mount. The conscience contains what Bonhoeffer calls "fundamental features of the law of life,"¹⁹ even though some of these details may

¹⁶Ibid., p. 243f.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 244.

¹⁸Ebeling, Word and Faith, p. 410

¹⁹Bonhoeffer, op. cit., p. 413.

be distorted and perverted. The liberated conscience still provides the warning against transgression of the law. But the conscience is no longer the final word. Jesus Christ is final. Because of our relation with him, we have a new relation to the law.

We are not to understand that there is a conflict between the conscience and the new law in Jesus Christ. Rather, since Christ is now our conscience the response to concrete responsibility is always automatic and positive. To act otherwise would be to live in disunity with ourselves and again slip under the accusing function of the law.

It is only as conscience that man, God and the world encounter each other. It is to the conscience that the law and the gospel appeal. As we come into unity with God sola fide, we experience unity with ourselves. But the claims of the world, or our neighbor, confront us as concerns of the conscience. Ebeling has an interesting concept at this point. He says the "conscience has to do with futurity."²⁰ This is the 'redeemed' conscience, for in its negative mode it has to do with a lack of future or death. This is a very meaningful concept for theology since it has to do with hope or eschatology. This does

²⁰Ebeling, Word and Faith, p. 247.

not do injustice to the law-gospel concept, for the gospel is eschatological. Also, it is not hard to conceive how 'futurity' could fit into the pattern of the tertius usus legis. Decisions made now, and actions taken now, determine future prerogatives. The law can be an aid to the conscience in its crucial relations to the world.

The question we raise now is how far can the conscience be trusted as a guide? Ebeling says that it is essential that we "follow the urgent dictates of conscience as a guide for the proper interpretation of theology."²¹ Of course he understands this as a conscience which is true to Jesus whom we confess.

Does the conscience then have a certain defined content? In other words, does it have a certain set of rules which it prescribes for a man prior to faith, and another for a man after faith? Earlier we briefly mentioned the 'call of conscience.' Also we spoke of the 'law written on the heart.' There have been many false concepts of conscience from which we must free ourselves. We misunderstand it completely when we think of it as a codex of laws or general truths. The 'law written in the heart' is nothing else, according to Ebeling, but the "pure call and question of conscience . . . the question

²¹Gerhard Ebeling, Theology and Proclamation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 80.

mark branded ineradicably upon man."²² It calls man himself into question, it places demands upon itself.

In so far as man hears his conscience and comes into unity with himself, or identifies with himself, the conscience receives its content. As long as man lives in disunity, the conscience has no content. The call itself issues from that to which the conscience is oriented. This may be either a law of its own devising, or the law of Love in Christ.

Ebeling says there are two things which contribute towards determining the content of the conscience. The first is the "concrete situation in which the call of conscience takes place and to which it is related."²³ The conscience does not function in abstractions or generalities, but in relation to concrete situations.

The second contribution is "everything in the way of training in understanding concrete situations which exist as a result of education in the widest sense and thus of participation in the history of language."²⁴ This refers to the fact that the conscience is definite and individual. Man acts upon that which concerns the individual. Therefore it is misleading to think in terms of

²²Ebeling, Word and Faith, p. 420.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

'national' or 'world' conscience. It is altogether possible that those things which train or educate, and upon which the conscience acts, will affect others. However, the final decision is always an individual one.

Such considerations as these lead to highly individualistic thinking. At the same time it places a high responsibility upon man. Paul seems to understand man's self as a specific self, but at the same time one which is willing to take responsibility (Rom. 9:1; II Cor. 1:12). This new responsibility is found outside the conscience, in Christ. It is made possible by faith, since faith is obedience to God's word or demand. So as Bultmann indicates, Paul can substitute faith for conscience.²⁵

In summary we can say that the role of conscience is to call man into unity with himself. It judges the intent of one's mind (nous). It has knowledge of man's own conduct. Ebeling contends that man is conscience. As such, conscience cannot be law. That is, the conscience and the law are not one and the same thing. The mind (nous) determines the direction man will take and the conscience is subject to it. On the basis of the mind's willing, the conscience defends it and calls it to unity with itself. If the mind responds to a new

²⁵Bultmann, op. cit., I, 220.

orientation, i.e., justification, or a new being in Christ, then again the conscience will call man into unity with himself on the basis of this new orientation. In any case, the conscience is not the third use of the law or the law itself. The third use of the law was regarded as God's help in the performance of the works which are commanded in the life of the believer. But, to those who do not advocate a third use of the law, this definition is superfluous. The freedom which the gospel brings completely delivers them from any dependence on the law. The transposition which takes place in the conscience is not regarded as God's help in the performance of works, but as the operation of the law of Love for God. This is a spontaneous action resulting from man being in Christ.

The conscience can be a reliable guide when its relation is to the right source. For the Christian, the right source is God. But this is not to be regarded as God helping or guiding. The conscience receives the demand of God, but if the mind (nous) does not respond in faith, then man continues to live in disunity. The content of the conscience is not a certain set of codes, but a call which arises in concrete situations to which man is to respond.

The conscience, being the self's knowledge of itself, drives us to the search for clarity in the midst of confusion. What gives dignity to the task is the fact, as Ebeling puts it, that we know there is a promise of a "saving and healing Word."²⁶

II. THIELICKE'S VIEW OF CONSCIENCE

Here we want to see how Thielicke unveils the mystery of conscience. Throughout his writings, Thielicke constantly refers to the conscience and its role in man's activities and decisions. For a thorough understanding of his views we must look solely to his Theological Ethics, since this is where he continually points us.

First, we will look at the way Thielicke states the problem. Then we will turn to the nature of the conscience and the way it functions in man. This will be the major consideration. Our third concern will be with the law and gospel and its relation to the conscience. This is related through the doctrines of justification and sanctification. Finally, we will draw several conclusions from our study. Some of these will be from Thielicke himself and others will be my own. Again, we will want to keep in mind how Thielicke's view may parallel or diverge from those which we studied earlier.

²⁶Ebeling, Word and Faith, p. 421.

Thielicke recognizes that the term "conscience" has become so vague and ambiguous that it says nothing. Yet, for theological reasons it cannot be pushed aside by a mere wave of the hand. The reason differences of opinion arise is because of differences in the understanding of man. One's view of conscience is determined by what is regarded as the "normative factor determining human existence."²⁷ So the ambiguity about conscience arises out of the fact that the unifying center has been lost.

This 'loss of a center' results in a search for substitutes. But Thielicke warns that we must not try to find the "most Christian" among many possibilities, modify them and give them theological sanction.²⁸ Rather, our task is "to seek a common factor in the various interpretations."²⁹ Thielicke feels that this is possible because we are talking about the same man in each case. Only after we have found the common factor in the various interpretations can we hope to interpret it. For our purposes we want to interpret it in the light of the law and the gospel.

One of the elements which is constant among all the divergent views of conscience is the fact that in

²⁷ Helmut Thielicke, Theological Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), I, 298.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., I, 299.

"conscience there is always a dialogue between two authoritative selves."³⁰ Man comes up against his own being-as-it-is and addresses it with the claim of an imperative. This imperative or 'law' in the conscience functions in two ways which really mean the same thing. First, it acts as a "witness" whose testimony will be given on the last day. Second, our conscience acts in such a way that our thoughts accuse as well as excuse one another. So, says Thielicke, the "Conscience means that witnesses stand up against one another, that there takes place in man a continual fluctuation between accusation and defense, that there is a contest of opposing 'parties.'"³¹

Therefore, we can say that the formal structure of conscience appears as a cleavage. As such, conscience cannot be regarded as a unifying factor. Rather, it takes sides. Consequently, it cannot be simply equated with the voice of God.

Luther's teaching on conscience varies slightly from that of Paul. Luther says that the conscience prior to faith is not the bearer of the imperative. He understands it to be "the defense counsel which opposes the imperative of the divine Law."³² Before faith, the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., I, 300.

conscience is my defender before the divine accusation, after faith, the conscience is the accuser before which God himself undertakes my defense. So the conscience is never neutral, but it can change sides.

The conscience, being the expression of the cleavage within man, speaks of restlessness, uncertainty and insecurity. It plays the dual role of trying to anticipate the final accusation of the final judgment, and at the same time endeavoring to justify itself against this accusation. This is the crisis in which, Thielicke feels, the conscience finds itself.

The 'unredeemed conscience' may be regarded as the conscience prior to faith, which tries to defend itself against the accusation of God. It tries to heal the wound or bridge the gulf which exists between God and man. This endeavor is an attempt to "make satisfaction," which consists in good works. But, says Thielicke, there is a threefold error in works as an attempt at satisfaction.

First, the idea of works is to make good a deficiency or to restore something. But the very nature of the Christian faith says this is impossible on the part of man. Second, to act on the level of the law (works), and thereby assume justification, is to regard oneself as a partner with God. Third, the whole matter of works and

the offering of sacrifices, "consists in the fact that in these works of repayment or restitution man does not give himself."³³ To give something less or to give something different from what man himself is, is to act as a hypocrite.

In all three attempts the restless conscience does injustice to God, thus being unjust to itself, resulting in continued unrest. We have seen that the quest of conscience is always one of peace. But peace is not to be found within the law. It can only be found outside the law.

Thielicke describes two sources of unrest in the conscience which may best be illustrated from two passages in the New Testament. The one most closely connected to the problem which we have been discussing is Hebrews 10. This passage describes the sacrificial ministry connected with the Temple. The law stated that sacrifices had to be made each day in the forecourt for the sins of the people. But this did not dispel the restlessness of the conscience. The sacrifices were a futile attempt at escape and justification, and furthermore, they could never cease.

³³Ibid., I, 303.

The sacrifices were performed in the "outer tent." This represents the law, the futile works of the people to justify their actions in the sight of God. This is to be contrasted to the Holy of Holies which the high priest entered once a year to atone for the sins of the people. Since Christ is now our high priest, his ministry is described as being "once for all."

Hebrews illustrates the attempt of man to placate God by sacrifices and to pacify his own conscience. In doing so, man does not recognize or accept the peace which is meant to come to him through Jesus Christ, which is the "once for all" sacrifice and is alone his peace.

The other passage in the New Testament which illustrates the unrest of the conscience is I Corinthians 8:7-13 and 10:27-29. These passages describe the alarm of the conscience which arises as a result of eating meat which has been offered in sacrifice to idols. This reference can refer to the 'redeemed' conscience. However, it still points to the problem of cleavage in the conscience, which is our concern. As we noticed earlier, even in the redeemed, there are 'unredeemed areas.'

Paul recognizes that idols are nothing. But they can become something through us. "If someone regards the meat offered to idols as 'something,' because he has not yet developed in his Christian faith to the point where

he can despise false gods, then he should be protected lest his conscience be unsettled and he be plunged into 'melancholy.'"³⁴ The point is, that while some do not worship idols, they nevertheless regard them as a reality. Therefore to eat meat offered to them would be to renounce God.

The unrest and alarm of the conscience, says Thieliicke, arises "simply from the fact that the comprehensiveness of Christ's lordship is not fully recognized; this is what gives rise to unredeemed forces and spheres of unrest."³⁵ The case is much the same as that in Hebrews. The unrest of the conscience is attributed to the fact that man will not let God be Lord.

Peace of conscience is really dependent upon what we are, i.e., "on whether we believe--and the extent to which we believe--in the boundless unconditioned mercy of God."³⁶ Only as we are truly in Christ, to the extent that he is our conscience, do we have peace.

Thieliicke does not mean to indicate that the unrest and despair of the conscience always reveals itself visibly. He locates the agonized conscience in the "no man's land between Christ and the world, between the

³⁴ Ibid., I, 307f.

³⁵ Ibid., I, 308.

³⁶ Ibid., I, 310.

Gospel and the Law."³⁷ But the conscience is deceptive and capable of disguising its own activities.

He characterizes the alarm of the conscience as repression. The goal of our action is security and the means is works and sacrifices. But works and sacrifices do not bring peace, but indicate the repression of an alarmed conscience.³⁸ There are indications throughout all of scripture that this is true. It can be illustrated by the claim of scripture that God reaches down even into the very thoughts of the heart.

Thielicke makes the interesting claim that "when we find a state of relative calm, we are to see it as the product of repression."³⁹ He bases this conviction on the fact that natural man cannot maintain an equilibrium outside the Lordship of Christ, without repression.

We may summarize this section by saying that the cleavage of the conscience indicates that man is in disunity with himself. The conscience as Bonhoeffer says, calls man to unity with himself. But this unity never comes, according to Thielicke, unless there is a change "within," which results in a pacified conscience.⁴⁰

This leads us to consider the conscience in the light of justification and sanctification. The miracle

³⁷ Ibid., I, 311.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., I, 312.

⁴⁰ Ibid., I, 313.

of the gospel does not automatically 'transform' or change the conscience. It does not immediately pacify or bring peace to the unrest of the conscience. Conscience must learn to understand itself in a wholly new way. As Thielicke says, it must die.⁴¹ This is true because the natural conscience cannot comprehend the offer of forgiveness. It senses in this offer a threat to its own self-preservation.

The result is that justification must take place in the face of the accusation of sinfulness that is constantly brought against me from the conscience.⁴² Nevertheless, I must believe in spite of bad conscience. As I accept forgiveness, I must not listen to conscience.

But what happens after justification actually takes place? Thielicke interprets Luther as describing two aspects of conscience in the justified state.

First, the "conscience finds rest in the acceptance of the divine promise, that promise which addresses itself to me and assures me that I personally am the one intended (quoad me)."⁴³ This is a rational decision. It is something that I learn. I cannot find peace on my own, it

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., I, 314.

⁴³Ibid.

comes from the hand of God. This is consistent with the true gospel proclamation.

Second, the "conscience has this peace only as it is constantly spoken to it afresh."⁴⁴ Therefore, we cannot regard peace as a given habitus in the conscience. It still acts as a prosecutor against me, but now it sides with God's law against me.⁴⁵ Whereas before it could not be regarded as the voice of God, conscience has now "become in truth the voice of God."⁴⁶ After conscience learns to accept forgiveness, it functions on the behalf of God to prod us on to ever greater faith in forgiveness.⁴⁷

Furthermore, on the behalf of God, the conscience functions to bear witness to my lostness. This is necessary to maintain certainty of salvation. For the only way I can maintain this stance is to realize that of myself I am lost, and that salvation lies outside myself.

On this basis, faith is understood as a movement of flight away from myself towards the great possibilities of God. Faith can rest only when it has reached the goal of its flight. But we are not to regard faith as a happy possessor or allow it to degenerate into a

⁴⁴ Ibid., I, 315.

⁴⁶ Ibid., I, 319.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., I, 315.

psychological event. We do not orient faith or forgiveness to experience.⁴⁸

Of course, we do experience something, but it should be regarded as something added to us "as well."⁴⁹ The point is that this is not the goal of our faith, but a by-product. We find justification outside ourselves, and we must constantly orient ourselves to the object of our faith rather than to any by-product.

In summary we may say that in the natural man the conscience tries to defend the action of man against the accusations of God. So far as there is an appearance of calmness, it can be regarded as the result of repression. The cleavage exists as long as the conscience is against God.

The conscience is not 'won over' to God immediately as a result of justification. It must learn to accept the full measure and meaning of forgiveness. As it does so it becomes the "God-given organ of renewal."⁵⁰ It is the voice of God.

We do not understand peace of conscience to be a state which exists, but as the object and result of a "promise" which is declared.⁵¹ The conscience 'changing

⁴⁸ Ibid., I, 317f.

⁴⁹ Ibid., I, 318.

⁵⁰ Ibid., I, 319.

⁵¹ Ibid.

sides' can be understood in the symbolism of death and resurrection. As the self dies it comes to new life in Christ. The conscience then becomes something by which God acts on me. It ceases being against God.

Thielicke concludes by saying, since "conscience becomes a representative of the author of the Law, and constantly receives anew the promise of forgiveness, it is to be localized theologically within the tension between Law and Gospel."⁵² This means that the conscience is either on the side of the law, or it is on the side of the gospel. There is no continuity.

Thielicke's more traditional exposition of law and gospel makes it possible for him to locate more precisely the cause of the crisis. The 'cleavage' is the result of the 'loss of center.' This is characterized by an unrest in the conscience which confirms the fact that man will not let God be Lord.

Thielicke does not talk about the 'content' of the conscience as such. But it would be out of keeping with his understanding of the law or conscience to suggest that he thinks in terms of a set of rules for the conscience. I am sure that he would agree that in so far as man hears his conscience and comes into unity with himself, the conscience receives its content.

⁵²Ibid., I, 320.

The final question we may raise is, how far can the conscience be trusted as a guide? Is it a reliable guide? The unredeemed conscience would not be a reliable guide. The redeemed conscience would be a trustworthy guide. For the truly redeemed conscience finds its peace outside itself in the goal of faith. It is not a state, but an event. As such the conscience acts as the voice of God, an organ of renewal.

But the conscience cannot act as the word of God unless we let it. The free choice is made by the mind, and may be withdrawn at will. As the conscience learns the meaning of forgiveness its role is to lead us into even a greater understanding of forgiveness. For we must remember with Thielicke that the event of sonship does not guarantee that all the departments of my ego are integrated in this new existence.

While there are wide areas of agreement between Thielicke and those we studied earlier, the way they arrive at their conclusions is very different. Also in Thielicke's acceptance of the third use of the law he parts company with his opponents. Thielicke would place the conscience with God and against man in the effort to bring peace and unity. His opponents would say that when a person receives a new orientation and comes to be in Christ he experiences unity with himself.

The peculiar significance and value of Thielicke is the seriousness with which he treats the conscience theologically. His clear exposition provides some understanding of the issues, which in turn will help to unscramble the crisis of conscience.

CHAPTER VI

LAW AND GOSPEL IN THE SERMONS OF HELMUT THIELICKE

Our purpose in this last chapter is to try to determine if Thielicke is successful in preaching those doctrines which he has so carefully developed. Therefore, I have chosen a number of representative sermons and have attempted to locate some distinctive features which will testify to his success or failure. First, we will look for evidence of the law in its accusing role and its relation to the gospel. Secondly, we will explore Thielicke's use of the law in its pedagogic or third sense. Thirdly, we will analyze his use of the law and gospel in its relation to the conscience. Finally, a separate section will be devoted to exploring the way in which Thielicke constructs a sermon in terms of the law-gospel sequence. But before proceeding to our designated task, it will be helpful to review Thielicke's major points concerning these issues.

We learned that for Thielicke the sharp distinction and the tension between law and gospel must be preserved in order that the law can be law and the gospel gospel. This distinction is necessary

to safeguard the miracle in the Gospel whereby God overcomes himself, and his love saves us from the threat of his holiness . . . [and] . . . to see to it

that neither Law nor Gospel is weakened and robbed of its true character by the attempt to establish a teleological relationship between them, between God's love and God's holiness.¹

Also, we can recall that for Thielicke the law must come before the gospel. The law takes man to the gospel, but man has the responsibility to respond. The law does not carry man against his will. For the unbeliever the law has a twofold significance as an imperative. First, it "is that we should drink from the right source."² The second form of the imperative is the demand to renounce whatever hinders the Spirit. We are not left to fulfill the law by our own initiative. It is God who works, and not ourselves. The imperative is merely a call for action.

The law is meant to bring man to the point where good works arise "automatically."³ That is the result of the event of justification. This is gospel. The character of the gospel is pure grace. This grace must be seen as a miracle, something God does, something man cannot match, only accept.

The unity between law and gospel comes in faith. Faith is not a habitus, not an attribute of existence.

¹Helmut Thielicke, Theological Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), I, 117.

²Ibid., I, 85.

³Ibid., I, 54.

Rather it is understood as a movement from God the judge to the God who is gracious to me in Christ.⁴

Thielicke develops his third use of the law under the designation of the "continuing pedagogic significance of the law for believers." He understands this aspect of the law as being God's help in the performance of the works which are commanded. It is seen as a help in the life of the believer without an accusing function.

The law retains its significance because the Christian life is always incomplete and in the process of becoming. We stand at the beginning of justification, not the end. So, Thielicke contends:

we would have to agree that it makes sense to have flashing red lights on both sides of the path we have to tread, as reminders that it runs through alien territory and is flanked by deep abysses. We are redeemed children of God, but there are unredeemed areas in us.⁵

The 'flashing red light' is the law. The 'unredeemed areas' refer to those individual spheres of life that are not related to sonship.

The third use of the law should be regarded as a helper rather than a condemning judge. It is a loving reminder, a kind of sheep dog which keeps the flock to the path of the shepherd. It serves to relate the

⁴Ibid., I, 98.

⁵Ibid., I, 130.

individual spheres and stages of existence to the fact of justification.⁶

In the conscience, Thieliicke sees a "dialogue between two authoritiative selves."⁷ Man comes up against his own being-as-it-is and addresses it with the claim of an imperative. This imperative or 'law' in the conscience functions in two ways which really mean the same thing. First, it acts as a "witness whose testimony will be given on the last day. Second, our conscience acts in such a way that our thoughts accuse as well as excuse one another. So, says Thieliicke, "Conscience means that witnesses stand up against one another, that there takes place in man a continual fluctuation between accusation and defense, that there is a contest of opposing 'parties.'"⁸ Consequently, the conscience cannot be simply equated with the voice of God.

In the natural man the conscience tries to defend the action of man against the accusations of God. So far as there is an appearance of calmness, it can be regarded as the result of repression. The cleavage exists as long as the conscience is against God.

The conscience is not automatically attuned to God as a result of justification. It must learn to accept the

⁶Ibid., I, 133.

⁷Ibid., I, 299.

⁸Ibid.

full measure and meaning of forgiveness. As it does so it becomes the "God-given organ of renewal."⁹ It becomes the voice of God.

The peace of the conscience is the result of a "promise" which is declared, rather than a state which exists. The conscience 'changing sides' can be understood in the symbolism of death and resurrection. As the self dies it comes to new life in Christ. The conscience then becomes something in which God acts on me. It ceases being against God.

Thielicke concludes, since "conscience becomes a representative of the author of the Law, and constantly receives anew the promise of forgiveness, it is to be localized theologically within the tension between Law and Gospel."¹⁰ This means that the conscience is either on the side of the law, or it is on the side of the gospel. There is no continuity.

Thielicke's more traditional exposition of law and gospel makes it possible for him to locate more precisely the cause of the crisis. The 'cleavage' is the result of the 'loss of center.' This is characterized by an unrest in the conscience which may be attributed to the fact that man will not let God be Lord.

⁹Ibid., I, 319.

¹⁰Ibid., I, 320.

I. PREACHING LAW AND GOSPEL

Under the designation of the accusing function of the law, man is seen trying to fulfill the law of God. It is not that man feels this law is bad. In fact he feels these ideals are pretty sound and tries to make them his own by endeavoring to live up to them. He discovers that this is impossible. His anxiety increases as he recognizes that not only are these his ideals, but they are the commands of God. The more he strives to fulfill, the broader the chasm becomes.

Thielicke's sermons abound with incidents of how the accusing function of the law throws man into a dilemma. In his sermon "The Costs of Grace," man is shown that even Jesus Christ "does not subtract one jot or tittle from the severity of God's will, that he came not to abolish this threatening law, but rather to fulfill it, indeed, to make its profoundest threat apparent."¹¹ From the very beginning, "as a kind of introduction to discipleship, Christ makes us feel the implacable severity of the law and thus leads us to death."¹²

¹¹ Helmut Thielicke, Life Can Begin Again (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 37.

¹² Ibid., p. 40.

As man confronts the Word of God, he becomes ever more conscious that he cannot get off lightly. In "The Parable of the Seed and the Soils," Thieliicke says, "The Word of God . . . is not a feast for the ears but a hammer. A man who comes from it unbruised need not think it has taken root in him."¹³ Everything must be put on the line. Nothing can be held back. Secret bondages and dependencies "are what prevent us from finding peace and block full surrender. These are the thorns that prevent the seed from producing fruit."¹⁴

The rich man in "The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus" is one who tried to strike a bargain with God. He serves as a prototype of every man who tries to reason with God and justify himself. But, says Thieliicke:

when he thus quite literally "comes to an "end" he sees that he is absolutely separated from God. Now it becomes apparent how dreadfully different are the standards by which God measures our life. How foolish was our own assessment of ourselves and how foolishly we allowed ourselves to be assessed by others!¹⁵

The question of this parable is the "ultimate limits of our life and the ultimate limit of the patience of God."¹⁶ In this parable the accusing function of the law is

¹³ Helmut Thieliicke, The Waiting Father (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 56.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

brought forcefully to man, with the result that he must look beyond himself for help and comfort.

Perhaps the most painful part of this function of the law is that when man comes to grips with it he discovers that "all the evil in the world comes out of my heart, my apostasy, my disobedience. So first, things have to be set straight here, at this tiny little point in the great wide world."¹⁷ Only as man has stood himself before the judge, as Thielicke describes it in "The Judge Accused," and has broken down before that judgment, is he ready to hear the gospel.

So we are at the point of the gospel. Thielicke contends over and over again, that "the judgment by itself is no help at all if there is nothing else besides."¹⁸ The Sermon on the Mount is law. But it is judgment with acceptance. Only in Christ do these words of the law become the glorious gospel that promises that for every man "Life Can Begin Again."¹⁹

Thielicke makes it quite clear that the gospel can be understood only through Christ:

Only if we view the mystery of life through him, through the Center of history, does it gain its old clarity; for when we look through him we are looking into the heart of God.²⁰

¹⁷Thielicke, Life Can Begin Again, p. 153.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 7. ¹⁹Ibid., p. vii. ²⁰Ibid., p. 140.

If we want to know what the gospel is we must look to Christ. If we want to see what God is like, we look to Christ. It is impossible to understand the mystery and miracle of God's act of love without seeing how Christ figures in it.

The gospel does not become miracle until man recognizes Christ saying, "This have I done for you. . . . Only then will we comprehend the cross of Calvary. Otherwise it becomes so innocuous that ladies dare to use it to ornament an evening dress."²¹

When a man recognizes that what Christ did he did for him, that his mercy was bestowed upon him, he no longer needs to struggle to conquer himself, for he has been conquered by a higher power. Now man can throw himself on the grace of God. As Thielicke says in a moving paragraph:

Then quite of itself, quite spontaneously, there flows from my heart a stream of compassion. And there you have a miracle, like the miracle God performed when Moses smote the hard rock where none suspected there was saving water and the rock opened and the bubbling, springing wonder occurred. I need only open my own heart, this hard rock, to the stream of divine love and compassion and quite of itself it will flow on in a thousand rivulets; not because my own heart has suddenly acquired such peculiar virtues (it remains a wicked and desperate thing), but because this divine stream has great power; it seeks to flow

²¹Ibid., p. 45.

through my heart and out of it again to others, and all the evil spirits of judgment and vexation must be drowned in it every day.²²

The truth still remains, the law must be fulfilled. But it is no longer a threat. For the law is fulfilled by love. Not a love that is demanded, but a love that is made possible by what Jesus Christ did for us. He showed us this love. As Thielicke says, "I can only give my whole heart when another whole heart gives itself to me. I can only love if love is shown to me."²³ This is the heart of the gospel. Love is the fulfillment of the law because when "I love I am there as a whole person, for love is a movement of my whole heart; love is always an overflowing, limitless giving of one's self."²⁴

II. PREACHING THE PEDAGOGIC USE OF THE LAW

The pedagogic use of the law may be distinguished from the accusing function of the law by its motivation. The accusing law says "you must." The pedagogic law says "you may." The accusing law forces, while the pedagogic enables. Even where the pedagogic demands, it does so only to those who are waiting willingly to hear, with the express purpose of obeying. Growth and advancement

²²Ibid., p. 156.

²³Ibid., p. 48.

²⁴Ibid.

characterize this use of the law. It comes to those who have been justified by the grace of God.

Thielicke reminds us that the law must remain:

It must remain like gauze in the deep wound in our heart, to keep it from healing too easily and forming an invisible scar that would fool us into thinking that we are not wounded and sick at all, that we do not need anybody to die for us and to forgive and heal us as a savior.²⁵

This law does not remain to threaten, but to remind us that there are still unredeemed areas in us. If we want to grow we must learn to accept God's forgiveness for our weaknesses as they appear.

There are definite directions given us for this new life. We are not put out to pasture to wander as we may. Rather instructions are given for every aspect of life from private devotions to public pronouncements. We may think of three relations which we must maintain as a result of our relation to Christ. The first is that which we have with ourselves. This includes the disciplines of the Christian life which help strengthen personal devotion and prepare us for the other two relationships. The second relation is that which we have for others. Good works characterize this dimension. The final relation is that which we have with or toward

²⁵Ibid., p. 44.

others. Rather than bringing judgment because of our own self-righteousness, there is acceptance.

Thielicke sees the disciplined life as being central to the life of the Christian. Without it, there is no power to perform the duties of the Christian life. We do not wait for the right mood when our hearts are free from care and anxiety. We are reminded that Jesus repeatedly commanded his disciples to pray. It is simply the Christian's "service, the obligation, so to speak, of his office as a Christian, that he should pray."²⁶ We must remember under whose command we are. We do not have to take the responsibility for the command, that is the commander's responsibility. But we have to respond to the command.

To rely on a mood is deception. We do not do that with our work. We come as we are. This is the way that the Christ child came to us on the first Christmas.²⁷ Personal devotion helps keep fresh in our minds whose we are. The motivations for our acts must be pure. We have been brought to the right source, now we must drink.

The point Thielicke tries to make is that not only do we return from the far country, but we must make sure we do not return to the far country. It is possible to

²⁶Ibid., p. 101.

²⁷Ibid., p. 102.

keep one foot in the old country and one foot at home. A disciplined life increases our chances of remaining at home. So, he says, part of this discipline or training may be fasting.²⁸ Coming home and remaining there is not so simple and automatic as we may think. He quotes Paul, "I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (I Cor. 9:27).

As Thielicke describes the workings of the third use there is never the feeling that it accuses you, but that this is instruction, a possibility for growth. Constantly the reader is reminded that this is part of the enablement. Of course the Word of God is demanding. And as we have chosen this path there are certain standards to which we must measure up. One of them, as has been indicated is that the Word of God "demands a stretch of time in our day--even though it be a very modest one--in which it is our only companion."²⁹

We are reminded that the scriptural imperative is to "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). Grace does not come cheaply. "You come to God only if you allow yourself to be mobilized and if you march."³⁰ Therefore, we are reminded that our freedom

²⁸Ibid., p. 113.

²⁹Thielicke, The Waiting Father, p. 55.

³⁰Ibid., p. 60.

consists in the choice of masters. But now we serve from love.

In our relation for others, Thieliicke demonstrates again the severity of the law. We are reminded that no area of our life is free from God. "How small has become the segment of life in which we are still willing to grant supremacy to the sovereignty of God!"³¹ A new creature in Christ does not act on his own merits, but on the merits of Christ. We can never forget the radical nature of our commitment. In his sermon "Every Word an Oath" Thieliicke shows the importance of words and the ethical implications of white lies. Even our speech is transformed. Our eternal destiny is encompassed in the two words "yes" and "no."³²

Good works fall in this second area also. We are not saved by good works, but we are saved to do good works. It is rather assumed that good works will be done as a result of justification. According to Thieliicke this is not really a problem to such people. He quotes Luther who once said, "there is no need to command a stone lying in the sun to become warm; it becomes so of itself."³³ This is what he entitles one of the moral commandments of Jesus.

³¹Thieliicke, Life Can Begin Again, p. 58.

³²Ibid., p. 62.

³³Ibid., p. 82.

It is not whether you should do good works or not, but it is the good works themselves which cause the problem. This leads us to the final dimension of our relations with or towards others. The danger is that our righteousness may become primary to us and we begin sounding our own trumpets.

The first thing that we must learn to avoid is retaliation. The way to another is not a tooth for a tooth nor an eye for an eye. We turn the other cheek, thus making ourselves defenseless before another. For the ultimate goal of our action toward others is "the reconciliation of the other person, who has been dearly purchased, for whom he poured out his blood."³⁴ The transforming power of the gospel is simply this, the loving of one's enemies.

The second thing from which we must refrain is judging. We may be ambassadors of Christ and carry the message of reconciliation, but we do not sit in judgment on others. What Jesus is opposing in the Sermon on the Mount, is the human judgment

in which we attempt to anticipate the final judgment of God and thus forget that every one of us (from the Nuremberg court, to lowest magistrate's hearing) is on his way to the Last Judgment. That is to say, when we forget that one day all of us must

³⁴Ibid., p. 73.

stand before the judgment seat of God, when we imagine that we ourselves are sitting in unimpeachable majesty on that judgment seat, then there comes into our judging the tone of self-righteousness and presumption.³⁵

We must also remember that we are under the same grace that those we would condemn are under. Therefore our free responsibility is to share with others the mercy which has been given us.

Finally, and most important, comes the command which is also the greatest challenge--do the Word of God. What does this mean? Thieliicke says the Word of God is the foundation of life. It defies storms and will not wash away as the sands shift. But he makes this important qualification:

It is not the Word of God as such that becomes this rock foundation for us, but only the Word of God that we do, the Word that we take seriously in our life. And therefore it is not the words we rattle off daily as we mechanically say grace at table, nor is it a hurried recitation of the Lord's Prayer or our daily Bible reading . . . No; the only Word that abides to eternity is the Word that is done.³⁶

We live with this Word, build upon it, stand upon it; it is the greatest reality of our life.

Thieliicke is successful in making a clear distinction between the accusing and the pedagogic uses of the law. The last use is meant to lead and guide. These are

³⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 212.

necessary possibilities with the right sense of motivation. It is the great possibility which could not be fulfilled before salvation by faith.

III. PREACHING ABOUT THE CONSCIENCE

In considering Thielicke's preaching about the conscience we must first determine what kind of conscience he is speaking of--the redeemed or unredeemed. In the natural man it plays the dual role of accuser and defender. Even in the redeemed man it is not automatically won over to Christ. It must learn the full measure of forgiveness. Therefore, the conscience becomes most deadly in the natural man, it throws us in turmoil as we face the law of God and accept his justifying grace. Thielicke shows this aspect of the battling conscience in a few of his sermons.

In the prodigal son who left home, the first role of the conscience was to defend his rationalizations. He felt good about his decision and his conscience commended him. But as things got worse his conscience began accusing and tormenting him. He felt miserable in the cloak of his assumed attitude.³⁷

³⁷Thielicke, The Waiting Father, p. 28.

Another example of the conscience changing sides in the natural man is described in his sermon "The Costs of Grace." In this sermon the heart is designated as the conscience. "Luther once said that 'at first' God is my accuser and my heart my defender."³⁸ That is, when the unconditional law makes its absolute claim upon me, as it does in the Sermon on the Mount, my heart or conscience immediately takes a defensive attitude. It argues:

"How can God demand this of me? You really cannot help it if evil thoughts spring up in your heart and all kinds of things bubble up in your unconscious mind. You are responsible only for that sector of your ego which you can control as an acting, willing, conscious person. You can say," whispers my conscience, arguing as my attorney, "that any demand that goes beyond this sector is not your responsibility."³⁹

But in the second act, the conscience changes sides. Here my heart or conscience is the accuser and God is my defender. Thus the conscience replies:

You did not come from the hands of God in the state you are in now, with all your ulterior motives and all the evil impulses above and below the threshold of your consciousness. Therefore everything that is in you is charged to your account."⁴⁰

But God takes over my defense against the conscience. It is Jesus Christ which takes up my cause. I become conscious that there is something within me against which he must fight.

³⁸Thielicke, Life Can Begin Again, p. 46.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

So Thieliicke concludes, I am never safe from my accusing conscience. It is ready to pounce on me at the most unexpected times. What I must learn to do is to rely on my divine defender and cry out, "Christ is here!"⁴¹ I am in his custody.

In the sermon "Does Faith Pay Dividends?," Thieliicke again makes the claim that the conscience is an unreliable guide:

For our conscience--insofar as we take it even half way seriously--tends to defend and relieve us, constantly reassuring us that we have done right and that God's blessing cannot fail to come to us. When it comes to the ultimate things the conscience fails. It is by no means the voice of God.⁴²

Thieliicke deals with the conscience adequately when he speaks of its dual role. However, most of the time he does not seem to hold it in high regard. In his Ethics he indicates that it is possible for the conscience to be won over and that Christ can become our conscience. It was not possible for me to find any reference to this in his sermons. The nearest suggestion is in his sermon "Does Faith Pay Dividends?". He says, "A conscience which is not bound to God's Word is a dangerous will-o'-the-wisp and an inexhaustible mine of self-righteousness."⁴³ Then he continues by saying that the conscience

⁴¹Ibid., p. 47.

⁴²Ibid., p. 86.

⁴³Ibid.

is an all too flattering and optimistic lawyer for the self. And therefore one thing is sure: in the struggle between the accusations of the devil and the defense of the conscience the devil always wins-- simply because his eye is sharper than our conscience and he is not our friend.⁴⁴

In his sermons, Thielicke never sees the conscience as being a reliable guide. In the natural man it confuses the issue. I found no examples of him speaking of the conscience of the redeemed man, in whom the conscience, being won over to God, becomes a reliable guide.

IV. THE STRUCTURE OF THIELICKE'S SERMONS

When I speak of structure, I am thinking especially of those sermons in which the sequence of law-gospel is important. It is my judgment that Thielicke does maintain a sharp distinction in his sermons between law and gospel, but there are other questions which must be answered.

In those sermons which have as their theme law and gospel, how does Thielicke develop his argument? What purpose does each part of the sermon serve? How does he introduce a sermon? Does the sequence law and gospel follow in his sermons, in that order, as he teaches elsewhere? How does he conclude a sermon?

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 86f.

Therefore my purpose in this section is twofold. First of all I will include what I think he is trying to do, how successful I feel he is in accomplishing his goal and how the parts of the sermon strike me. Secondly, I will test my evaluation by illustrating his development in a sample sermon.

It is obvious that Thieliicke has three concerns in sermonizing. The first concern is to make the text existentially relevant. From beginning to end everyone is drawn into the context. Thieliicke achieves this by speaking in the present tense, the now. He never begins with the historical past and moves to the present, it is always in the reverse order. But whenever Thieliicke moves, the listeners move with him, for the listeners are part of the cast in the drama he creates.

The second concern is to find the key which unlocks the text. The reader of Thieliicke's sermons will soon discover that he is developing one point. It is true that he approaches it from various angles, but he is dealing with the same theme. In the sermon "The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus," he identifies the key of the text as the speech of Abraham. The real issue is the relationship to the Word of God.⁴⁵ The listener is

⁴⁵Thieliicke, The Waiting Father, p. 42.

immediately involved as he begins to evaluate his own attitude and relationship to the Word of God.

In finding the key to the text, Thieliicke takes great care in making sure he is faithful to it. In trying to be existentially relevant he has not distorted the text to serve unjust or selfish motives.

His third concern is given to rewriting the gospel in terms that can be understood. But it is the gospel he rewrites. It is the old in the new, or rather he makes the old new. The point is that he does not write his own gospel or try to improve the one revealed in Jesus Christ. His genius is that he takes what has been revealed and unveils it again and again in fresh ways.

With the text fresh in the minds of the listeners, Thieliicke introduces the sermon with the purpose of identification. In the first paragraph people, text and sermon are drawn into one focus. Everyone is involved whether they want to be or not. He may accomplish this with an illustration, or merely by referring to the setting of the text and raising a leading question about it.

Sometimes the key to the text is identified in the introduction, but certainly no later than the first point. It should be said that the key is always an existential one. It demands an immediate attitude or

relationship. Therefore the main body of the sermon is developed around this key issue.

In his sermons, Thieliicke's sequence is from law to gospel thus remaining consistent with his own teaching. He takes pains in the development of the pilgrimage from law to gospel. In every case he clearly shows three things. First that it is our attitude toward and disregard for the command of God which drove us into the corner. Second, it is possible to get out of the trap, not by our own merits but because God has made it possible for us. Finally, the decision is ours. We are not forced to change, we are not pressured to accept the gift. It is ours to accept or reject.

The conclusions to the sermons are normally quite short. By this time he has made his case. They are not "pushy" in the sense of forcing one to make a decision, neither are they judgmental. The only judgment felt is that which is brought upon oneself. The conclusions may be characterized by hopefulness. It is as if a gift is within reach, but one must reach out to grasp it if it would be his.

Among the best illustrations of Thieliicke's ability to fulfill what I have just described is his sermon on "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." He begins the sermon with an illustration, with the purpose of

identifying the listener with the text. He then locates the key to the text in the problem concerning freedom. The following is an analysis of the remaining parts of the sermon in the sequence in which he develops it.

The boy leaves to take his fling. Soon the law, in its accusing function, begins its relentless attack.

And yet this is the way it is: the more unhappy and lost the son feels the more he celebrates, the more he throws himself into the company of his "friends," the more he diverts himself. "He diverts himself"--we know what that means. More than anything else it means that he can no longer be alone; he must have something going on around him. What did we say? He cannot be alone; he must have diversion. And one day this realization must have struck the prodigal son too. (It strikes us all at some time or other, when God is so gracious as to remove the blinkers from our eyes.) But when he cannot and therefore must, then he is no longer free! No, God knows, he is not free. This is the great new thing that suddenly dawns upon him--him who, after all, set out to be free, free above all from his father.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 24f.

The boy has high ideals, but learns shortly how impossible it is for him to keep them. The truth of the law as prohibitive is made plain in the life of the boy.

The fact is, of course, that we are always subject to one master. Either to God, and then we are in the Father's house, possessing the freedom of the children of God, sons and not servants, with constant access to the Father. Or we are subject to our urges and therefore to ourselves, subject to our dependence on men, subject to our fear--with which our hearts are always well supplied--our worries, our Mammon.⁴⁷

The accusing law brings the boy to repentance. The knowledge that his father waits for him, is an inference of the gospel.

I wonder whether we can visualize this turn in his life. Surely he must first have been disgusted with himself. And this disgust grew as he saw in his mind's eye the pinnacles of his father's house, which he had lost and upon which he no longer had any claim. He knows he has no right to sonship. But now, as he remembers his father's face when he left, suddenly, despite all the justified scruples, he knows that his father is waiting for him. And as he looks at his empty hands, even though he realizes that he is too ashamed even to lift up his eyes to his father, he knows, he is sure that his father is waiting for him.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

The son cannot gain entrance by himself. He does not deserve to be received. But the amazing, undeserved love receives him (gospel).

The fact that the lost son was taken back again is not attributable to his greater maturity, but solely to the miracle of God's love. Here a man has no claim whatsoever upon God. Here a man can only be surprised and seized by God. It is the amazing, gracious mystery of God's love that he seeks the lost and heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents.⁴⁹

Acknowledgement of condemnation under the law, is followed by an undeserved gift (gospel).

But Jesus wants to show us that this is not the case and that we shall be given a complete liberation. "You are right," he says, "You are lost, if you look only to yourselves. Who is there who has not lied, murdered, committed adultery? Who does not have this possibility lurking in his heart? You are right when you give yourself up as lost. But look, now something has happened that has nothing to do with your attitudes at all, something that is simply given to you. Now the kingdom of God is among you, now the father's house is wide open."⁵⁰

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 28.

The ultimate theme is not really the faithlessness of men, but of the faithfulness of God (gospel). Thus Thielicke concludes on good news (gospel).

And this is also the reason why the joyful sound of festivity rings out from this story. Wherever forgiveness is proclaimed there is joy and festive garments. We must read and hear this gospel story as it was really meant to be: Good News! News so good that we should never have imagined it. News that would stagger us if we were able to hear it for the first time as a message that everything about God is so completely different from what we thought or feared. News that he has sent his Son to us and is inviting us to share in an unspeakable joy.⁵¹

He ends on gospel!

The ultimate secret of this story is this: There is a homecoming for us all because there is a home.⁵²

Thus the progression of the sermon has been from the relentless attack of the accusing law, through the recognition of one of the prohibitivum of the law, to the point where the law has led to the threshold of the gospel. Then the gospel is seen in its true colors, something that is undeserved, something that is a gift, given in the face of man's unworthiness!

⁵¹Ibid., p. 29.

⁵²Ibid.

It is possible to follow this same process with nearly any of Thieliicke's sermons. Of course, the parables lend themselves to more picturesque ways of thinking, but where the text lacks color, Thieliicke uses imagination.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to determine the understanding of law and gospel in the thought of Helmut Thieliicke. To this end I have explored three critical areas in the debate; the sequence of law to gospel, the third use of the law and the relation of law and gospel to the conscience.

In chapter III we learned that Thieliicke insists on two things. First, a sharp distinction must be maintained between law and gospel. This is to insure that the holiness of God on the one hand and the love of God on the other are appropriately expressed. Second, the law must always precede the gospel. The law is meant to lead man to the gospel. It does this through a twofold imperative. The first is the demand to decide for the Spirit. The second is the demand to renounce whatever hinders the Spirit.

Chapter IV describes Thieliicke developing the third use of the law which he designates "pedagogic

significance of the law for believers." This is law without an accusing function. It is seen as a help in the life of the believer. It is needed to remind the believer that all spheres of life are to be related to sonship. Therefore the third use of the law may be regarded as a reminder of the real theme of one's justified existence.

Chapter V sets forth Thielicke's understanding of how the conscience is related to law and gospel. His major thesis is that the formal structure of the conscience appears as a cleavage. As such man is in disunity with himself. Even after justification the conscience must learn the full import of this new existence. If it learns to accept forgiveness, it becomes the God-given organ of renewal and calls man into unity with himself.

In the final chapter it has been my intention to locate illustrations in Thielicke's sermons of his use of the law and gospel, in that sequence, the third use of the law and the relation of the conscience to law and gospel. Also I have attempted to analyze one of his sermons to determine his development in terms of the sequence only.

I have no question but what Thielicke has been successful in his preaching of law and gospel, and that

he has remained true to his teaching in Theological Ethics. The sequence has been carefully maintained. To my mind he is a master in picturing the dreadfulness of the law on the one hand and the miracle of the gospel on the other.

After having traversed this territory, I hope that the reader has, first of all, sensed to some degree the intensity and importance of the present debate with regard to law and gospel. Secondly, I hope that some appreciation for Helmut Thielicke has been gained which would enrich the lives of those who take the trouble to wrestle with his ideas and enjoy his sermons.

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